Lateral
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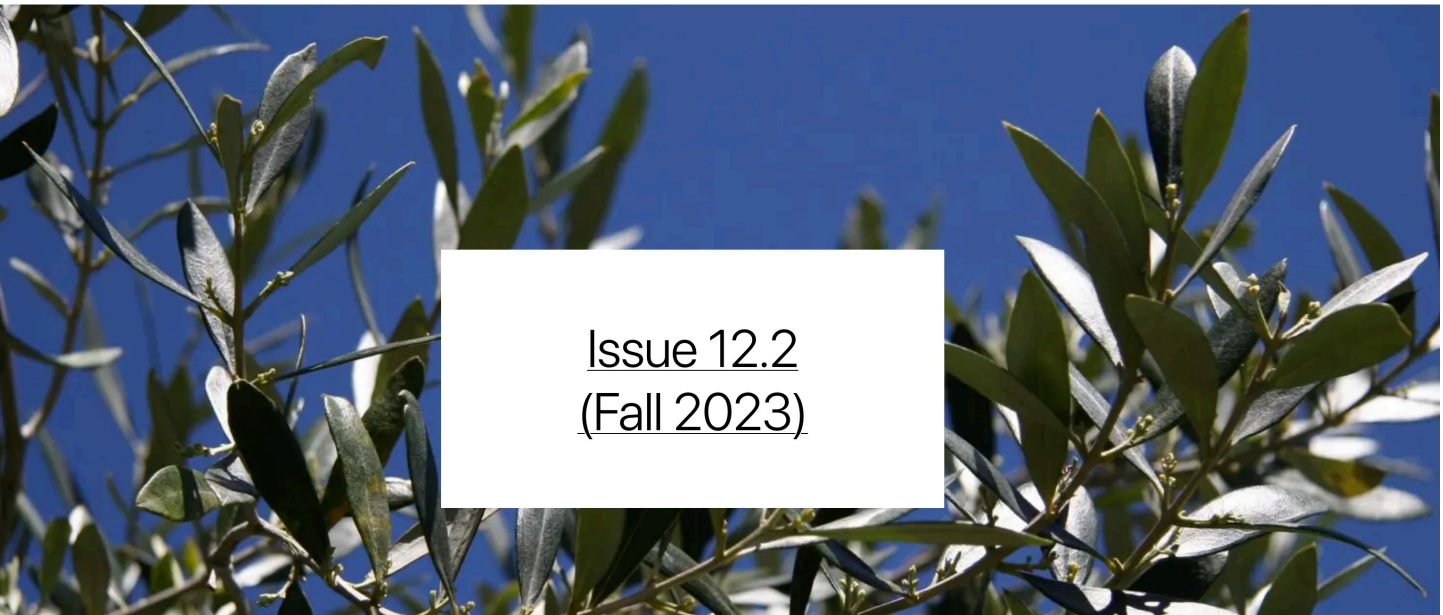

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Editors' Introduction: Cultural Studies toward a Free Palestine

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ABSTRACT Responding to Palestinian organizers' calls to use our voice, continue to engage in conversations, and to speak out, this statement articulates what we see as the abolitionist and anti-colonial way forward—the only way we can commit to a free Palestine. Imagining and building alternatives is the future, the horizon of possibility, that *Lateral*, as part of the intellectual and activist project of cultural studies, is imperfectly but consistently striving toward. Here, we highlight work in this issue, including the Towards Third Worlding forum, articles, book reviews, and the second installment of the Positions podcast. We continue to welcome authors to join in this work of pushing the field of cultural studies further, towards its promise of critical inquiry matched by political engagement.

KEYWORDS Palestine, abolition, anti-colonialism, cultural studies, scholarship, settler colonialism

A little over a year ago, Noura Erakat reported on the work of the Palestinian Feminist Collective (PFC)[1] in an essay in the *Boston Review* entitled "Designing the Future in Palestine."[2] In it, she highlights work that gestures well beyond national liberation, toward revolutionary struggle from within societies, including Palestine. Erakat cites the indigenous seed archiving project of Vivien Sansour, along with the anti-colonial movement-building work of PFC founding member Loubna Qutami, who states: "We are disrupting the idea that we liberate ourselves politically first and then recreate our society from the ground up after." For Erakat, and in accordance with Palestinian feminists engaged in revolutionary struggle, "if

anti-colonial efforts seek to tear down oppressive structures, then decolonial ones aim to build alternatives." We see this as the abolitionist and anti-colonial way forward—the only way we can commit to a free Palestine. Imagining and building alternatives is the future, the horizon of possibility, that *Lateral*, as part of the intellectual and activist project of cultural studies, is imperfectly but consistently striving toward.

Palestinian organizers on the ground and Palestinian diasporic peoples have called for continued attention to Palestine to support their decolonial and anti-colonial struggles, essential both because of media blackouts and colonialist patterns of misrepresentation.[3] Such organizers have asked us to use our voices,[4] continue to engage in conversations,[5] and to speak out.[6] We amplify the authoritative sources who are still writing on and in this moment, even if they are doing so in so-called non-traditional formats like social media: Plestia Alaqad, Motaz Azaiza, Bisan Owda, and Wael Al Dahdouh, among others.[7] These journalists are keeping a genealogical thread alive in the face of the immediacy and urgency of violent erasure. They remind us that the unspeakable must be spoken, the unreadable must be written, that we must "take a bet. Not a bet on truth," or the possibility of saying it all, "but a bet on saying something."[8]

The Palestinian death toll currently stands at over 22,000 people killed, among them over 6,000 children; even more have been injured. Two million people have had to leave their homes and many of them have no home to return to because of the ongoing bombing by the Israeli military.[9] International courts will eventually rule if this unchecked killing and destruction meets the legal definition of genocide, but Indigenous feminists have long connected colonialism and genocide.[10] The crisis of our current crisis is that it simultaneously is exceptional and is not; it is both something we have never seen before and something that we have become inured to witnessing. Walter Benjamin reminds us, "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule."[11] And, as scholars of cultural studies, it is difficult not to

see the direct connections between Israel and the United States as settler colonial states. The Nakba of 1948 displaced more than 750,000 Palestinians and has its roots in the 1917 Balfour Declaration, wherein Britain officially recognized the Zionist settlements in Palestine; countless Native and Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island and Hawai'i were displaced and murdered as settlers from Britain, France, and elsewhere arrived.[12] Today, the bombs being dropped on civilians in Gaza are manufactured in the United States[13] and we cannot ignore the mutual economic benefits that run between the United States and Israel which allow for and facilitate such ongoing and wholesale destruction.[14]

There has been a sense of impossibility in writing at this time. Facing the enormity of genocide feels unthinkable with the paltry tools of scholarship, of writing, of speaking. How much agony, loss, outrage, and despair can be adequately conveyed through words? Another impossibility of writing in this moment is citationality. We believe in the politics of an ethical citational practice, of engaging in citation as a site of community, generosity, coalition, and solidarity. The genealogies created by citation are intellectual-political edifices, ways of shaping the future through pointed attention to lineages of thought and values. Yet, at least sixty-nine journalists have been killed in Gaza since the beginning of October.[15] Too many activists, artists, writers, and other cultural workers to count have been killed as well, like Palestinian scholar and poet Refaat Alareer, who was murdered on December 6 and whose loss is devastating and mourned by so many.[16] It is impossible to cite what goes unwritten.

At the end of October, an ad hoc scholarly coalition called Writers Against the War on Gaza (WAWOG) wrote: "Words alone cannot stop the onslaught of devastation of Palestinian homes and lives, backed shamelessly and without hesitation by the entire axis of Western power. At the same time, we must reckon with the role words and images play in the war on Gaza and the ferocious support they have engendered . . . we cannot write a free Palestine into existence, but together we must do all we possibly can to reject narratives that soothe Western complicity in

ethnic cleansing."[17] WAWOG cites the eugenicist framing by which Palestinians have been referred to as "human animals,"[18] the ways that the actions of the Israeli state have been framed as preserving the values of human rights and human life, as "self-defense," even as they destroy hospitals, churches, and refugee camps; and how, through all of this, the mainstream media has spun the genocide as a response to an "unprovoked attack" by Hamas and thus how the "conflict" "began" on October 7. We understand that much of the wild misinformation and irresponsible rhetoric surrounding Palestine and Israel is in large part caused by the dissemination of colonial and white supremacist ideologies; we understand that such dissemination is connected to colonial and white supremacist reading, writing, editing and publishing practices.

Another statement, this one by the "Writers in Solidarity with Palestine" makes clear: "Language is critical to how reality is shaped, to what is criticized, to what gets called a revolution. Islamophobic, genocidal, anti-Arab and anti-Palestinian rhetoric are all rooted in the languages we use. It is our responsibility to lay bare how language has been used to obscure and preserve the ongoing settler colonial project outside of Gaza."[19] And, as Toni Morrison reminds us, "Oppressive language does more than represent violence; it is violence; does more than represent the limits of knowledge; it limits knowledge."[20] Or to put it yet another way, from Edward Said: "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me."[21] As editors of *Lateral*, we take seriously the political and intellectual practices of writing as something that can buttress violence, but, too, can counteract it in the name of solidarity and liberation—not just in the here and now, but in the ever-present labor, to return to Erakat, of building alternatives.

We at *Lateral* understand that a commitment to Palestinian liberation, to decolonization, to abolition, is concomitant with a commitment to and work in cultural studies. We understand cultural studies as a deeply political and intellectual discipline and practice, and these stances are indebted to the

genealogies of cultural studies as foregrounded by Stuart Hall. For Hall, the serious study of the experiences of people insists upon dwelling in the nuances of identity intersections; as a Jamaican-born Black British scholar, he experienced all too keenly the ways in which "culture" was separated from both intellectual practices and political ones and instead wielded, defanged, as a marker of British liberalism and progress. In contrast, a cultural studies *habit of mind*, for Hall and many others, is to understand culture as a site of urgent inquiry and liberatory practices both ongoing and ephemeral. Throughout Hall's career, from his collaborative work on *Policing the Crisis* to his sustained prehumous critiques of neoliberalism in *Soundings and Red Pepper*, Hall's intellectual, critical, and political writing alerts us to the task of challenging the predominant ideological configurations of reality.[22] Thus, "the first task that cultural studies had to do turns out to be the last task as well: to do some work in conceptualizing culture more adequately than had been done in the traditions which were available."[23] The emergence of cultural studies as a framework of thought insisted upon "culture" as central to situating lived experiences and embodied knowledges as both constituted by and in resistance to structures of dominance. In his 1983 lectures at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, Hall argued for an understanding of culture as "experience lived, experience interpreted, experience defined" and engaged in, to borrow from Barbara Christian, the theorizing of *why* such living, such interpreting, and such defining mattered.[24] We at *Lateral* understand culture as material, and discourse as a point of production, and thus as a point of contention and movement and as pivotal for change. And yet, as Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang remind us, decolonization must be more than a metaphor.[25]

As an academic journal working in and through a framework of cultural studies, we urge our readership and respective affiliated organizations to recognize the ongoing genocide of Palestinians and the ongoing theft of their land as the hallmarks of settler colonialism; to take action in support of a ceasefire and find ways to fight for the abolition of the military-industrial complex; and to heed the

calls of our Palestinian, Arab, and Muslim students in demanding more from administrations in the places where we teach. Our students are amongst the youth paving the way to abolition, and we might take our cues from them. For instance, where we work,[26] students are making a variety of demands: from boycotting, divesting from, and sanctioning Israel (BDS), to broader calls for university administrations to cut ties with settler colonialism and racial capitalism, to calls for quotidian interventions like hiring Imams, making more literal and figural space for Muslim and Arab Student Associations on campus, establishing institutionally supported departments and programs dedicated to Middle Eastern and North African Studies, and supporting Palestinian Solidarity Weeks and coalitional justice organizations (including anti-colonial Jewish groups) on our campuses. We know written work matters, but material intervention both encompasses and exceeds written work; fighting against genocide must also involve other forms of action.

Such work is under way by anti-imperial and anti-colonial Jewish organizers, including If Not Now[27] and Jewish Voice for Peace,[28] who refuse to allow "anti-Zionism" and "anti-semitism" to be irresponsibly conflated.[29] They reject the notion that calling for a ceasefire in Gaza is somehow too radical of a demand: "We need a ceasefire now, and we need Palestinian freedom from bombs, starvation, genocide, apartheid, occupation, and all forms of oppression; and we refuse to let Jewish pain be co-opted to support these horrors."[30] While we know only a few examples, we know there are decolonial and anti-colonial organizers on the ground in Palestine and the surrounding region, including the aforementioned Palestinian Feminist Collective, members of the Birzeit University Union of Professors and Employees in Ramallah,[31] and several MENA/SWANA-based feminist groups who signed a statement titled "Anti-Colonialism is a Feminist Issue" on October 14.[32] In the US, on university campuses and in surrounding communities, organizations are actively working and expanding such as Academics Against the Assault on Gaza,[33] Faculty for Justice in Palestine,[34] Students for Justice in Palestine,[35] and Within Our Lifetime,[36] among many more.

Just as there has been a sense of impossibility in writing at this time, ending this introduction similarly evokes a feeling of incompleteness, of the poverty of language against this moment. Still, within the context of editing, there is work to be done. Readers and contributors can find our commitments to editorial alternatives in our Publications Ethics Statement < https://csalateral.org/about/#ethics> : "recognizing that research and publication are as imbricated with issues of power, inequality, access, and justice as any other arena, we acknowledge that *Lateral* must take intentional actions to respond to its context." As such, *Lateral* follows COPE: Committee on Publications Ethics' "Code of Conduct for Journal Editors < https://publicationethics.org/files/Code_of_conduct_for_journal_editors_Mar11.pdf> " and has adopted "Anti-Racist Scholarly Reviewing Practices: A Heuristic for Editors, Reviewers, and Authors < https://docs.google.com/document/d/1lZmZqeNNnYfYgmTKSbL2ijYbR4OMovv6A-bDwJRnwx8/edit#heading=h.ymiupo69pn4r> " as part of a process of continued improvement. We do not offer this approach as the singular answer but as one of many necessary interventions.

As Sa'ed Atshan writes, "Absolving oneself from relations to imperial powers does not necessarily mean that one can be absolved from other relations of oppression."[37] Any critique of Israeli settler colonialism and agitating for Palestinian liberation must be intersectional[38] in nature: women of color feminisms, queer of color critique, disability/crip studies, Black Studies, and Marxist analysis, to name but a few, have also—although, not always—offered many of us sites in which to ground our critique and agitating in relation to anti-Blackness, xenophobia, Islamophobia, capitalism, cisheteropatiarchy, misogyny, misogynoir, and ableism. Such sites have historically functioned, and continued to function, as spaces for building and maintaining alternatives, too. We remain committed to building alternatives, including through the mechanisms we have at our disposal at *Lateral*, and we continue to welcome authors to join in this work of

pushing the field of cultural studies further, towards its promise of critical inquiry matched by political engagement.

In This Issue

Authors in the "Towards Third Worlding" < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/towards-third-worlding/> forum take up Vijay Prashad's invocation that "the Third World was not a place. It was a project."[39] The serious excavation of the Third World as a kind of *doing* instructs us on two critical points: first, that the geopolitical machinations of empire created the designation "the third world" as a means of continuing empire's unchecked regimes of power, and second, that a deep and avowed resistance to such domination has always existed and must continue to exist. In their introduction < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/introduction-el-zein-kanuga/> to the forum, Rayya El Zein and Malav Kanuga ask the central question: "What would a critical return to the internationalisms of the Third World project offer workers, community leaders, prisoners, climate activists in the current moment?" As "diasporic writer-organizers in the United States engaged in struggles around abolition, Palestinian liberation, migrant justice, climate justice, and political education," R. El Zein and Kanuga highlight the urgency in historicizing the myriad and ongoing struggles occurring in the United States and understanding their connections. They write: "Alongside those working to build community accountability in the aftermath of violence, our exploration of Third Worlding is a search for frameworks of interpellating comrades into struggle." Among the sites of struggle explored in the form are the history of the Third World movement < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/decolonization-and-the-third-world-namakkal/> , the Republic of New Afrika < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/captive-new-afrikan-nation-solidarity-liberation-onaci/> , Ali Sardar Jafri's epic poem *Asia Jaag Utha* < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/reawakening-ali-sardar-jafri-

asia-jaag-utha-ramnath/> , and the 1967 Naksa and afterlives of Egypt's defeat in the Six Day War < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/anti-colonial-defeat-1967-naksa-consequences-el-zein/> .

Also in this issue, Thokozani N Mhlambi's "Regional Mobilities, Technology and the Status of Myth in Africa: Retrieving Musical/Creative Codes in KwaZulu-Natal before Colonialism" < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/regional-mobilities-technology-myth-africa-musical-creative-codes-kwazulu-natal-colonialism-mhlambi/> analyzes craft specializations in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) in relation to cultural and ritual repertoires that predate European colonialism. In doing so, Mhlambi offers a wider regional and continental history with the potential to inform African identities today.

James N. Gilmore, Madeline Hamer, Valerie Erazo, and Patrick Hayes return to January 6, 2021 in "'Whose house? Our house!': Streaming Revolution during the US Capitol Riot." < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/whose-house-our-house-streaming-revolution-during-the-us-capitol-riot-gilmore-hamer-erazo-hayes/> This co-authored article examines the roles of affect and social media in the cultivation and dissemination of extremist political views. In addition to their insightful critiques, the authors model a novel methodology involving crowdsourced video and social media archives that are then scrutinized for their formal aspects and political content.

Renyi Hong and Zachary Mun Wei Chan's "Making Live through the Gig: The Case of Comfort Taxis in Singapore" < https://csalateral.org/issue/12-2/making-live-through-gig-comfort-taxis-singapore-hong-chan/> explores the gendered nature of gig culture and how the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC) Workers' Co-operative Commonwealth for Transport created life possibilities and restraints for working-class Singaporeans in and beyond the 1970s. The authors compare internal documentation from the cooperative with news articles and government statements to explore how the "family man" emerged as a key figure through the

state's incorporation of unlicensed "pirate" taxi operators, and how this figure continues to inform contemporary changes in Singapore's gig economy.

Finally, "Let's Relax!," < https://csalateral.org/podcasts/positions/lets-relax/> the second episode of the Positions podcast produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter, finds Andrew Culp and the Cultural Studies Association's Performance Working Group Co-Chair Hui Peng discussing "relaxed performance" with Leigh Jackson, Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at People's Light outside of Philadelphia, and Dr. Hannah Simpson, Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave, 2022). The podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Patrick McKelvey.

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Regional Mobilities, Technology and the Status of Myth in Africa: Retrieving Musical/Creative Codes in KwaZulu-Natal before Colonialism

by Thokozani N Mhlambi | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT This article tracks my intellectual journey in trying to understand the role played by craft specializations before the colonial era in KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa), which is the area where I come from. I do this by a comparative look at how craft specializations happened in other parts of the African continent, an approach prompted by the absence of older written or documentary sources on KwaZulu-Natal, prior to the advent of European colonialism. A key finding of the research is that the cultural and ritual repertoires of craft specialists reveal conceptual domains of expertise that are derived from intra-African regional dynamics. This contrasts with the colonial belief that implied that notions of expertise were as a result of European or Asian human contacts. In looking at craft guilds, I am interested in how ritual, technological skill and the mastery of certain musical/creative acts played a part in the formation of regional blocs in ancient Africa. Such a historical understanding may be crucial to our present-day understanding of emergent processes of regionalization and identity formation.

KEYWORDS Africa, colonialism, craft, migration, music, myth, performance, ritual, ubunyanga

From a formalistic point of view, it is hard to conceive of philosophy in its systematic form in pre-literate societies. Substantively, it is equally hard to imagine peoples without some conception of, or ideas about the meaning of existence, notion of being and its imperative/logic, and the purpose of mankind in the universe.[1]

Introduction

The aim of the research in this paper is to situate the historical musical and cultural practices of the province of KwaZulu-Natal (South Africa) into a wider regional and continental viewpoint in the precolonial era.[2] Such a task is not easy because (1) most writerly and documentary activities on the area took place in the nineteenth century, that is after the colonial encounter; (2) the long intellectual isolationism of South Africa during the apartheid years meant that it was largely excluded from debates around regional identities and mobilities prior to colonialism, which have sustained inquiry in other regions such as West Africa and East Africa.

In my archival fieldwork, I found the notion of *ubunyanga*, a complex category which seems to have, at one time in history, designated a variety of skills in KwaZulu-Natal, including stonemasonry, metallurgy, music composition, healing, and thunder herding. This helped me to map out a conceptual field on which one could place craft specialization as an indigenous mode of professionalization and knowledge-making. I, later, discovered that there were similar collectives of craft specialists located in different parts of the African continent, such as the Congo basin, West Africa, Zimbabwe, Tanzania, to mention a few. Craft groups seemed to be united not so much by questions of polity but rather those of expertise and skill, either in metalworking, music composition, hunting, healing arts, and others.

Following this observation from my research, I launched a series of performative and writerly meditations on the relationship of ritual, technological skill and mastery of musical/creative acts. One of the musical mediations to emerge was a work called “Indlela eBheke eAzania” (the road to Azania), which tried to reimagine a journey undertaken by traders and crafts people from KwaZulu-Natal to the Swahili coast in east Africa, in past centuries.[3] Another creative work I created is called “Sebenza Insimbi” (working the iron), which combines electronic sound composition and body movement in silhouette. This work retrieves the

reclusive practices of metalworkers, who were required to erect their furnaces next wooded areas for fuel purposes. They also used musical codes to mark analogical relationships between iron bloom production and fertility rites.[4]

Figure 1. Indlela ebheke e-Azania (“Voyage vers Azania”), a musical work in three parts, based on a historical African legacy, created by the author.

The current article expands on this growing *oeuvre* meditating on craft production, by a special focus on intra-Africa migrations and regional mobilities, looking at the movements as particular ways of convening African publics across time and space, and in ways that do not imply monolithicism in terms of ideas generated and deliberated on the continent. In this way, the work also deviates from a tendency to overemphasize the emergence of innovation in Africa because of human contacts with either Europe or Asia.

A key observation of this article is that cultures of technological, ritual and performative mastery figure prominently in various regional contexts on the African continent. Some of the convergences in technological production and mythmaking tells of the possibility of intra-regional mobilities happening at the nexus of expertise and possession of ethereal capabilities. The conceptual similarities across regions may not "prove" to us a prehistoric unity among the speakers of those respective languages (BaKongo, Zulu, Shona, Fipa, etc.), as has been the tendency to imply in the theories of Bantu expansionism. These similarities do, however, imply that there was sharing of information between producers of those crafts that had to have emerged through migration or travel. Such movements supported practices for expert knowledge preservation and sharing.

The specific question for this paper is how do we integrate far older views on land and belonging (and the concomitant question of being "First People") into the conversations we are having today about African ecologies—conversations which also tend to victimize and trivialize those with the strongest case of being the "First People"? It seems as though being "First People" always intimidates those who are new arrivals, who are also looking to make claims to the land. What they usually then try to do is disremember the histories and connections of those who came before.

I present here a comparative study of precolonial craft specialists in Africa.[5] Such a study demonstrates how technological skill and mastery of ritual were influential in the formation of regional blocs in ancient Africa. This may assist our present-day understanding of emergent processes of regionalization, as discussions unfold about (a) the creation of an African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) as part of the African Union's Agenda 2063, and (b) the ongoing attempt to reconceptualize regional blocs, as seen in the attempt to establish a single currency in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS).

Bantu Expansionism

In discussions of the spread of iron craft skill in Africa, the linguistic hypothesis of the "Bantu" is often invoked. The term "Bantu" is a Zulu word meaning people. It has been used as a loanword in English for certain nefarious reasons.[6] The most elaborate use of the term has been to denote an original language supposedly spoken by the ancestors of many of Africa's populations today. The reasons that "Bantu" is used as the term for the so-called original language are purely coincidental rather than systematically-derived. An early use of the term appeared in *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* by Wilhelm Bleek, who as ethnologist studied the *-ntu* root, observable in many languages of Africa. He began to speculate about the commonality it implied; that it could in fact suggest a primordial unity between the speakers of such languages.[7]

The term was also taken up in the establishment of area studies at universities; when in the 1920s departments of Bantu Studies began to emerge at universities such as Cape Town and the Witwatersrand. The emphasis on ethnological and philological observations in Bantu Studies gave to the term Bantu a kind of scientific legitimacy. It is this genealogy of the term that was absorbed into the field of historico-linguistics. Scholars such as Harry Johnson in the 1920s, Malcolm Guthrie in the 1960s, and Jan Vansina in the 1980s began to suggest that the migrations and territorial movements of proto-Bantu resulted in the distribution of a people over the continent with a linguistic uniformity/similarity/commonality. The linguistic commonality is believed to have paved the way for the dissemination of a set of peculiar ways of organizing living and using technologies, which include (1)the introduction of social formations which were centralized, with elders as advisors, etc., (2) the domestic keeping of animals as trade value and food supply, (3) elevated importance of cattle, (4) formalized agricultural methods, (5) knowledge of high-temperature chemical reactions (metal production and ceramic-making).

As the story goes, the skills were moving with the people as they migrated from the west to east, and then gradually south. Scholars have many dissenting views on the theory. Malcolm Guthrie was first to suggest the split between western and eastern branches of Bantu.[8] Guthrie's work was unique in its level of detail. It was based on a comparison of over 3000 words in nearly 200 Bantu languages. What he discovered was that there were about 2300 common word roots, with a significant geographic distribution. There were over 500 general roots found throughout the area where Bantu languages are spoken. Out of the 2300 root words, 400 were identified as belonging to the eastern branch, and about 250 appeared only in the western speaking branches.[9] Bantu expansionism was then taken up by Roland Oliver, who emphasized the idea of Bantu coming to invade the areas of autochthones such as the Hadza in Tanzania and the Khoi in the Cape. He wrote, "it is the cultivating Bantu who move in and absorb the representatives of older and less successful cultures."[10].

The advent of the personal computer in the 1980s, led linguists to return to the method of lexicostatistics. The method was then also taken up by Jan Vansina, as a historian rather than as a linguist.[11] Drawing from Guthrie, Vansina added aspects of historico-linguistics, that is lexicostatistics and glotto-chronology. Indeed, the history of words became of elevated importance, over and above their basic meaning: words were cartographed in order to make certain assertions about the movements of people and their technological innovations.

Although this article does not intend to be a detailed discussion and criticism of Bantu expansionism, I felt it necessary to discuss the theory. What is important to mention is that this is certainly not the only scholarly debate on using language as a tool for understanding culture and history. Another important debate occurs in the field of African philosophy, as debated by scholars such as Alexis Kagame, D. A. Masolo, Paulin Hountondji and others. The lexicostatistical argument (advocated mainly by historians) could benefit from the deep theorizations emanating from African philosophy. A recurring critique emerging from the field of

African philosophy has been on the question of the *a priori* of language. Masolo has argued that although philosophy is concerned with the *a priori*, the idea of the *a priori* of language is in many ways problematic. This is because language is perhaps one of the most responsive elements of culture, to social and geographic changes.[12]

My own approach, therefore, takes Bantu expansionism as simply a narrativization of African movements, which is open to exploration and interrogation. But it is merely one way—and not the only way—of apprehending historical phenomena on the continent. I agree with Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyiigo's viewpoint, who criticizes the Bantu expansionism theory, claiming that since 1962 the linguistic evidence has had an over-determining influence in the reconstruction of the origin of African peoples. He argues that too often the genetic relationship between languages is emphasized, over other types of transformation and contact, including internal dynamics.[13] Furthermore, such a focus by historico-linguists on the atomic level of language tends to obfuscate other inherent patterns that are more legible at a conceptual rather than at an atomic level. The reason for me saying so is that the kinds of assemblages around crafts, as offered in this paper, uncover interlocking concepts across regions which were prompted by fields of expertise. These tend to become concealed when one is dealing with language simply at the atomic level as historico-linguistics does. At the conceptual level, comparing myths can reveal similar ways of approaching phenomena across regions, which can be useful at elucidating local and inter-regional ideas.

Myth

Before getting into a specific discussion on ideas generated around crafts, it would be good to get into a brief discussion of myth, its status and general value in the apprehension of the world by human beings. My thinking on myth is informed by deliberations emanating from African philosophy and, to some extent,

anthropology. There are many ways in which people deepen their understanding of their present situation by drawing on the past. One major way certainly is through history, but there are other possibilities, including myth and philosophy, which demonstrate a wider field of memory not canalized in intentional history writing—something that is more sedimented in the stories that people tell about themselves, who they are, where they come from.[14] One of the hallmarks of myth is its reliance on the biographical mode, due to the centrality of human actions (anthropocentricism) in the stories conveyed, even objects or animals may be assigned humanly qualities in the unfolding of myths. Because of the biographical nature of myth, in societies there are major myths of origin, accounts of how people arrived, or of the beginning of time. Such myths depict a moment of order in nature, and then announce a variation which threatens to disrupt that order. The fault is explained together with its causes, in a way that reveals the possibility of human will and intervention for the restoration of order. Ritual becomes a tool through which the correction and restoration of order is rationalized.[15]

The intention to mould and overcome the obstacles of the environment and forces of nature is prevalent in the founding myths of societies. Threats of nature in KwaZulu-Natal, for instance, are those of thunder and lightning,[16] those of seasonal drought in the highlands of Zimbabwe, and insect disease in the low-lying areas on the south-east of the continent. Whether it is the deity who falls from the sky, or the story of the lizards who interact at the beginning of the world, what is apparent is that (1) nature is viewed as consistent/dependable, and (2) myth then anticipates a strategic action on the part of the human to sustain that balance.[17] Orderliness is produced in myth through the idea of genesis or creation, viewed as an intervention in absolute chaos, sometimes expressed as barrenness or infertility in African myths (especially those related to craft skills like metalwork). Creation thus becomes an induction of nature, to teach it to yield to human development needs.

If we are to use the biblical account as an example, a paradox arises in the scene of paradise, for although recalled as pristine and orderly, it is in paradise that the sudden realization of one's nakedness occurs. This is the humiliation which initiates man's quest to overcome this imperfection. This possibility to overcome is the optimism that myth uses to transform the human situation. Myth as a genre universalizes, by not being held to time and space, but at the same time the cause of its dilemma is specific, local, and/or historical. The universal element is in the relatability of the effects (both physical or metaphysical) to a variety of people.[18] In this way, it can be freed from the limitations of time and space, without detracting on its impression on its receivers.

Levi-Strauss has contributed immensely to the scholarship of myth. What is important about Levi-Strauss's contribution is expressed in the analogy of the woodpecker. Commenting on the myth which recounts that the touch of the woodpecker's beak cures a toothache, Levi-Strauss suggests that it is not a question of the factuality of the statement, but rather a prompt to imagine a possibility where a woodpecker and a person's tooth can be understood together, as having a kind of congruity—which may indeed have therapeutic results, as well as a variety of other social or psychic results.[19] Mythical thought expresses itself in ways we may consider assorted (or mix-masala) in terms of its repertoire. Notwithstanding this assortment, the choice is rather limited.[20] Myth is compelled to use this limited repertoire, in whatever creative means, as it has nothing else to draw from. Levi-Strauss continues:

Mythical thought, that 'bricoleur', builds up structures by fitting together events, or rather the remains of events, while science, 'in operation' simply by virtue of coming into being, creates its means and results in the form of events, thanks to the structures which it is constantly elaborating and which are its hypotheses and theories. But it is important not to make the mistake of thinking that these are two stages or phases in the evolution of knowledge.[21]

Like the bricoleur who is a master of making do with whatever is available, so is mythical thought. Its frame of reference is closed, yet the materials themselves may be heterogenous in variety. One can think of the medicine compartments in the furnaces of iron smelts, for instance. In many cultures the medicine pit was usually located inside a furnace, at the base. Here were concealed amulets, charms, bone, precious stones, hide, and sacred plants. Some of this material could partake significantly in the chemical reaction, such as bone which acted as a flux, thus lowering the boiling point of iron.[22] Other material performed a purely symbolic function; however, these were not distinguished in a hierarchy of significance as they existed in the heterogeneity of myth. Mythical thought concerns itself with the assortment of oddments collected from previous human expression.[23] What you have in the end is an outcome whose approach is the same for all occasions, enriched by repetition and variation.

Prevalence of Craft Groups

Although craft specialists seem to be a relatively understudied area in southern African studies, in other regions such as in west Africa and east Africa the field is somewhat more developed, with both ethnographic and archaeological choices considered, as well as the revisionist work based on Arabic manuscripts (e.g., *Ta'rikh al-Fattash*). In the literature on craft specialists, they appear in certain contexts as guilds, in other contexts as castes, and in others as social pariahs altogether—exempt from state authority, viewed as spiritual authority, but providing technological innovation (of high-temperature technologies, etc.). Their innovation allows them to operate across regional authorities and seems to offer a different discursive space than what has been imagined in the outmoded notions of "tribe" or "clan." And with these alternative discursive spaces, there must have been a range of ideas and concepts, which were not simply absorbed in the communal apparatus.[24]

The articulation of such an alternative space cannot be presumed *a priori* based on the perceived value of craft technologies. It would need to be gleaned from the structural and metaphysical layout informing artisanship within those societies, where technical aspects are inseparable from the rituals and social roles assigned to those individuals, where obligations to nature and wildlife (as exemplified in the role of the *bisimbi* in the Congo and other areas) are of equal importance as obligations to rulers and ancestors.

The areas of expertise were similar across different regions, such as healing through plants, divination, metalworking, masterful (griots)storytelling, music, and poetry, to mention a few. According to Tal Tamari such similar "endogamous" specialist groups of musicians and artisans are notable amongst the Manding-speaking populations (including Bambara), the Dogon, Songhay, Wolof, Fulani, and Tuareg, among others.[25] One of the arguments made by Tamari is that such specialist groups emerged because of migration movements of populations; this is confirmed in clan names and in the distribution of musical gifts.[26] Her evidence suggests that "endogamous ranked specialist groups" were present in west Africa by the year 1300 AD. They were usually a small percentage of the population, never in the majority and could not be enslaved. Some of the most common vocations in west African specialist groups were metal-working, music-making and storytelling, leatherworking, woodworking, weaving, and calabash repair.

What is important from an artistic performance point of view is that the specialist groups had their own repertories of song, epic poetry, and gesture (dance) which distinguished their repertoire to that of ordinary folk. Bards had their own magical stories to tell, uncommon to the rumor-mongering and guesswork of the general population. Families known as specialists in jewellery designing distinguished themselves from regular smiths. For example, for the Senufo, certain metalworkers had the right to work only black metal (iron), whilst others were allowed to work the "red" and "white" metals (like copper, brass).[27] Similar observations have been made with regards to nineteenth-century KwaZulu-Natal

in relation to the jewelry-making at the capital of Dingane, uMgungundlovu. According to reports on the Zulu capital, the master smith responsible for designing the royal investiture and military emblems was not allowed to work on the rare metal of *ithusi elimhlophe kanye nelibomvu* (white and red copper, bronze) at his own homesteads, but was rather expected to work over a few days in the specially designated hut next to Dingane's apartment.[28]

In terms of woodwork, ancient mystery trees, where dwells *bisimbi* (nature spirits), and the output of these trees was restricted to special crafters, to build only the superior stools, ornaments, or musical instruments. In the Sunjata (Sundiata) epics of the Manding, there is a report of Sumanguru Kante who was an iron crafter and whose source of mystical power was a musical xylophone, which no one was entitled to play. Esteemed crafters served kings and chiefs as advisors and messengers, and they were expected to conform to certain avoidances. In terms of the historical reasons for the craft specialist social formation, Tamari says,

Thus, it seems that castes may have originated in interclan alliances contracted in conditions of extreme inequality. With time, these relationships, which may have initially bound the 'bards' and 'blacksmiths' only to the leading Manding clans, and their major correlates—exclusion from political office and a prohibition on inter-marriage—may have been generalized, creating endogamous, politically subordinate groups.[29]

From a southern perspective, one can imagine that groups of specialists themselves migrated eastwards and southwards, in search for better conditions. Upon arriving in new destinations, they localized, and adapted for new markets for their craft. Given the fact that craft productions have existed on the African continent for a very long time (even prior to Arab and later European invasions) they provide a different corpus from which ideas on regionalization and boundary-making can be considered.

Crafts in Relation to Metal Technology

Studies of technology reveal that how communities and individuals engage with technologies is a conscious choice that may reflect understandings of the social order, and spiritual and astronomical ideas of origin.[30] Technologies are also a result of geomorphic histories, for example the high level of interest in iron smelting and somewhat lesser interest in copper smelting in KwaZulu-Natal is a decision based on availability of raw materials. The geomorphological structure of the region did not allow for an abundance of copper ore. Most importantly, technologies arise because of political, pecuniary, and environmental reasons. As kingdoms fall, and new people arrive, as others move due to drought conditions or fleeing the frequency of lightning and thunderstorms (as they happen so regularly in KwaZulu-Natal), they desire ways and means of overcoming those obstacles. Technologies offer tools, whether real or imagined, for making their situations more liveable.

Studies of technology also lend themselves to a comparative framework of investigation since the elementary process of metal production are similar: they require both skill and physical work, access to forest (for fire), raw materials, tolerance for high heat, etc. However, the beliefs and enactments that accompany processes of metallurgical production differed from region to region, district to district. The social placement of metallurgy also differed, whereas in some instances metal crafters were regarded as outlying clans, sometimes they were closely allied with ruling powers, for example.

Iron making techniques were frequently combined with skills in music, medicine, divination, and storytelling. Whether one is talking of Shona, Zulu, or Luba, there is a remarkable semblance in the repertoire of terms involved in myths surrounding the crafts of divination, metal, and music. The continuities in language may not “prove” to us a primordial unity between the speakers of such languages, but what it does convey is an interconnection between the producers

of those crafts which had to have developed through travel/migration. Such movements promoted processes of sharing and preserving expert knowledge.

One must remember that the centrality of iron crafts in other productive acts, such as warfare, agriculture, hunting, fertility, and medicine, and the fact that it also required a large amount of raw material in terms of wood and ore, meant that it was always susceptible to political influence and was responsive to regional dynamics of control. In terms of ecological consequences, there is a sense that the expansion of crafts such as ironworking had a devastating impact on the ecology of the Congo basin, as it led to a lot of deforestation of trees used as fuel. During the slave trade, iron crafting guilds in West Africa were associated with slave trading; their labor was now defined by the elites, who controlled the networks of human trafficking. They made swords, javelins, axes, clubs, and spears for war. In tropical Africa, there is evidence of African smelters refining valuable commodities, with their minds set on both local and overseas markets.[31]

That there is a connection between metal production and myth in Africa is undoubtable.[32] In west Africa, the Hausa attributed iron crafting to a specific clan called the Asna. They did not live with everyone in the homesteads, rather they chose the holes in rocks and caves as their dwelling places. The founding myth of the Asna was that of a lady called Lola. Lola fell from the sky; she fell holding a hammer in one hand and a spoon full of food in the other hand. Lola had a reputation; she was known for being able to handle red-hot iron without burning. If an ironworker made her angry, Lola would take the hot iron off the forges. Musics, storytelling, and ironwork were the range of crafts performed by the Asna.

Those born in a family of iron crafters, became iron crafters themselves. Techniques, ritual, and medicine were used to convey the hereditary importance of the craft. There were versions of stories that said sons of women from iron crafting clans became bards and storytellers. Iron making techniques were

frequently combined with skills in music, medicine, divination, and storytelling. The image of the pregnant woman featured through smelting processes (such as in the shape of the furnace in other parts of the continent). The season for smelting began when it was full-moon and would end before the next moon appeared (about ten days). The lead iron crafter would prepare the smelting camp by aligning with the points of the stars as well as considerations of the organization of the village.[33]

In the Asna (Hausa) smeltings, the lead crafter would sprinkle medicines on the furnace, this was done delicately in circular movement. In between the sprinkling, the lead crafter would gesture some swirling movements, a kind of insemination of the ore, which is to enter the woman (the furnace), only then to emerge, new born, as iron. The words and gestures reflected a sexual comparison of the procedure to the act of intercourse. While the metalworker enacts his part of the ceremony, the storytellers and musicians would sing songs with sexual innuendo. There are a variety of sexual restrictions and beliefs about procreation. Women who touched a musician's instruments could lose a pregnancy or go through a period of barrenness. They believed that the poetry and songs assisted the furnace in its conception. The metalworker also had to appease the small creature (what in Zulu is called "tokoloshe," which can be compared to a genie in Arabian mythology). The creature is believed to live in the fields. Failure to appease the creature may result in them taking the life of one of the metalworker's family members. The knowledge about their crafts was carefully guarded and protected. In Hausa beliefs, metalworkers were associated with the protection of newborn babies. The metalworker could utter truths specific to the moment or make predictions about the future by reading the flow of the slag.[34]

Ubunyanga as Discussed in the South

Most of the information available about crafts of *ubunyanga* in KwaZulu-Natal comes from the missionary writings of the colonial period (in the nineteenth century). The elevated status of crafters and rituals gnosis were both abominable and fascinating for missionaries.[35] I have elsewhere argued that the missionaries emphasized the aspect of *ubunyanga* which pertained to divination and belief, as it is this that they wished to understand, and not political discourse or trade routes as such.[36] They believed that in understanding African custom and belief, they could find a way of explaining religious concepts to African congregations. So key to their interpretation of *ubunyanga* was a quest to find a language that would explain Christian ideas to African audiences. The language was drawn from the repertoire of myths, proverbs and spiritualities of local people, the *ubunyanga* complex was seen as significant in the corpus of thoughts by which Judeo-Christian religious ideas could be conveyed. The accumulation of concepts happened also amid missionary rivalries, as one missionary society aimed to surpass another in terms of congregation numbers, educational attendance, the ability to be at the cutting-edge of reproduction technologies such as a printing press, etc. Terms were forged, adapted, and contested—the vocabularization process was at the heart of some of the fiercest rivalries.[37]

Missionaries in Natal, such as John William Colenso and Henry Callaway, saw in the concept of *ubunyanga*, and the myths and repertories that accompany it, a resource which could be used in establishing a localized religious discourse in Zulu. Colenso spent a considerable amount of time in his early years (1850s) in KwaZulu-Natal interviewing informed people and clan leaders on the meaning of the term God in Zulu. As time went on he became very interested in the concept of *ubunyanga*, which he saw as an important vehicle to understanding precolonial views on belief and spirituality. Colenso's sense that *ubunyanga* was an important conceptual field is attested to by the detailed entry he gives to the term in his

dictionary. In Colenso's Zulu-English Dictionary (1861) the entry of the term "nyanga" is defined as follows:

Nyanga, v. Form by skill.

Nyanga, (In), n. Moon, month; clever person, one skilled in any part or business; particularly one skilled in medicine, a doctor (eyokwelapha).

innyanga yokubula=isanusi

innyanaga yokuqamba, a composer of songs

innyanga yokukanda insimb; a blacksmith

innyanga yokusebenz'amatshe, a stonemason

Nyanga (Ubu), n. skill in medicine; skill of any kind.[38]

Arriving a few years after Colenso, Callaway seemed to follow in his footsteps. He too became invested in the conceptual field of *ubunyanga* and went on to produce a book called *Religious System of the Amazulu* (1870). The book is a compilation of statements on what *ubunyanga* was, as obtained from a group of respondents/interlocutors. Let me say that in the testimonies given by the respondents in Callaway's book, there is a sense that the people to whom he spoke did not come from one area, but many came from different parts of the region between the rivers of Umzimkulu and Phongola. The explanations by the interlocutors are characterized by a general plurality. They are each peculiar, location-specific, as many respondents emphasized that their observation were based on one or two particular incidents, and not on widely-seen phenomena. A recurring methodological problem in the text is that some of the people interviewed were trying to recall things they last saw a long time ago. What is also true is that very few of the responses claimed to be first-hand accounts, given by an *inyanga* (or former *inyanga*). The people discussing were seldom (self-

confessed) initiates of the craft guilds, in a way that would give them a sense of the inner working of the craft. This probably had to do with the religious context in which Callaway and others encountered the informants.

The other segment of evidence pertaining to the practices of *ubunyanga* comes from a different archive. That is the archive of archaeological excavation. The material objects of excavations are able to tell us about metalworking sites of iron crafters and possibly the practices of stonemasonry. One of the things that emerges from this evidence is that the production of iron tended to be focused on particular areas, which served far wider, sometimes dispersed, recipient communities.[39] This was the work of *izinyanga zensimbi*. In the Callaway text mentioned above, *izinyanga zensimbi* are only cursorily mentioned. This could be because of a fairly limited sample of personal accounts, in terms of regional scope, used in the book. The fact that archaeological evidence reveals that metalwork tended to be focused in particular areas, may explain why it could be overlooked in terms of the sample of population he had at his to interview. Another explanation for the cursorily discussion of metallurgy could be that, as is the case elsewhere on the continent, that European observers tended to be more intrigued by rituals and myths than the technological processes of metal production.[40] This may be an exaggeration, but what is true is that the missionaries often lacked the technological know-how to allow them to ask the right questions about metallurgical processing.

Walter Cline's 1937 book is an important text; it compiled all the early reports on metal production into a single volume, the title of which is *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa*. Cline suggested that different regions in sub-Saharan Africa exhibited different views on the status of the metal crafter. In some areas they were feared and seen as a sacred community, like in West Africa. In the Congo, Forest Cline suggested that iron crafters were organized into guilds. They placed a lot of emphasis on ritual, and divination played an important part. Copper reserves are few and far between in sub-Saharan Africa. Iron, on the other hand,

is pervasive, revealed not only in its application but also, crucially, in the elaborateness of myths that surround iron. A few general characteristics found everywhere are, first, the personification of different implements in the metal-working process; second, the idea of metal production being a secret or mystical process; third, the exclusivity of metal production, the idea of smelting being performed by select families or clans.

Ironworking communities protected the knowledge that was both practical (artisanal) and ritual related.[41] An investigation of iron craft practice therefore demands keen observation of the myths, within which are encapsulated explanations about success or failure. This is important, as Louise Iles and Edwinus Lyaya note, iron production "is a resource-hungry and time-hungry technology that runs a high risk of failure."[42] After a poor smelt, for example, in KwaZulu-Natal it may have been said, "That nyanga did not eat enough impepho (African sage)."[43] In other places, a poor smelt may be blamed on the breaking of sexual and relational taboos. Rituals and myth surrounding the activities of metal production, are revealed in the design features on the tuyeres, bellows, medicines, and furnaces, and in the repertoire of song and dance which accompany the smelting process.[44]

Common Characteristics of Iron Myth

In terms of the general characteristics of African myth surrounding iron, it seems common that the story of the origin of iron is pegged to some ruler or Great Ancestor or great smelter who then taught everybody else. Sometimes the ancestor is so recent (like three hundred years ago) as is the case with the Barundi and Buganda, who credit ironworking to the region of Bunyoro, which is known to be rich in ore deposits. There is a tale told by the Thonga about the people of Ndondondwane (in southern Mozambique). This clan, due to their lack of ironworking skill, their case was particularly a shame. They could not kill an

elephant and skin it and cut it to pieces for cooking; they therefore had to cook the elephant whole. Similarly, abakwaNtlozi, who lived on the lagoon at St. Lucia (northeast of South Africa) were said to have no iron by other neighboring clans. The people abakwaMbonambi, one of their neighbors but also well-known specialists in iron and great makers of spears, harassed abakwaNtlozi as a result.[45] What these kinds of stories say to me is not so much that one clan was inferior to others, but what it does suggest is that those with technological know-how understood this as power. They constructed myths about those without the know-how. In reality, however, tools and implements were shared, traded between clans within regions and across regions too.

The Fang, in Equatorial Guinea and southern Cameroon, say they got iron skill from the Tua. The Pangwe branch of the Fang claimed to know iron but admitted that the descendants of Ngomwenio were far better iron crafters. In the Congo basin, the Bushongo (which incorporates BaKuba, and others) say that iron skill was given by the Creator and passed on through their fourth emperor. This happened a long time ago, before they moved southward. The Basonge say that they were given iron by Efile Mokolu (the Great Ancestor) (or what Zulu-speakers may call uMvelinqangi).[46]

Efile=the dead

Mokulu= the Great/Deep-time (Ancient) [For example, mkhulu in Zulu, which means grandfather].

The BaNyemmezi traced iron to the brother of the great ancestor, King MaKalasinde. MaKalasinde's brother name was Zina, and he was the giver of iron, according to myth. Zambian communities of BaKaonde and BaTwa acknowledged Leza as the Creator and as the bringer of iron. The Creator gave ironworking skill to their earliest ancestors. According to some Sotho-Tswana origin myths, one of the earliest ancestors was Noto (hammer), who was the son of Morolong (the forger/sharpener). There was an account of Sotho speakers from Klein Letaba

whose story of origin says that they were created holding the instrument of the forge in their hands. And for the Barolong (who are the iron crafters) one of their totems is *tsipi* (literally iron). One of the clan praises talks about "the sons of the dancers of iron."[47]

The BaKongo Smiths | *Forgeron Consecrateur*

The Congo area, as a centrifugal point of migrations in sub-Saharan Africa, is renowned for the most diverse metalworking histories and is home to some of the continent's oldest iron smelting cultures. In terms of myths related to the origin of iron craft, the BaKongo believed that they learnt ironwork from communities in the north and eastwards of the basin.[48]

From a research point of view, the metallurgical tradition of the BaKongo offers an interesting case, due to extensive documentary reportage having taken place both in the fifteenth century and the early twentieth century. Here, Mani Vunda is the priest of metallurgical mastery. It is his authority that the master smith is seen to represent, he is endowed with priestly duties in relation to the ruler. The smith coronates the incoming ruler by leading him through an initiation of re-birth. This is the process which establishes him in his leadership role. Told in the royal rituals and ceremonies is the story of creation, linking metallurgy to royal ceremonies of coronation, metallurgy to the growth and fertility of the clan—the story of how they, the BaKongo, became powerful. Original inhabitants of the land were imagined having been half-people (short people), who possessed a high level of skill and dexterity of metal. They had a profound understanding or connection with the invisible world of *bisimbi*, the local spirits who appear through nature, who are the custodians of fertility and technology. The *bisimbi* also hold together the dimension of hierarchical spiritual entities, including spirits of the dead, nature

spirits. Some believed that the older the ancestor, the more likely they are to transform into nature spirits.[49]

Stories in the repertoire of myths which informed BaKongo communities talk about a past age of life where there was a wizard called Nzondo. Nzondo had one eye and one leg. He gave BaKongo the gift of a spear with no handle. The spear is a symbol for metal production, warfare, and power. One of the names given to the short people, who are the original inhabitants who worked metal, is the *mbaka*. Some of the stories suggest that the new arrivals who were agriculturalists overpowered the *mbaka* and drove them into the forest, where they went into hiding. The Mbanza were founded by a Ntinu Lukeni, whose name means "violent one". Ntinu Lukeni left his homeland seeing that he was the youngest of many brothers and was therefore unlikely to inherit much from his parents' estate. He then left home to find land. He arrived in the area and found people he could easily subdue under his own rule. The chief oracle was Nsaku ne Vunda who was a famous master of rainmaking, hunting, and agriculture. He himself was not a ruler, but whoever ruled could not rule without him. "Ehlala eduze kwasentabeni yokwehlukaniswa, lapho amakhosi egcotshwa khona" (Nsaku ne Vunda lived very close to the "Mountain of Separation," where the ancient kings were ordained in Zulu). He was a specialist in healing of psychic illnesses. Ntinu Lukeni, in his independent mindedness tried to sideline Nsaku ne Vunda in his ascendency. Ntinu Lukeni was then struck with madness, which was cured once he apologized for his mistake.[50]

In an eighteenth-century account of a Mani Vunda, he acted as the chief overseer of the *bisimbi* cult and the lead advisor to the king and one of the most important members of the royal council. By the centrality of the Mani Vunda's role in the investment of new kings, the myth of Nsaku ne Vunda's healing of Lukeni is replayed. The state of madness is interpreted as the general state of mankind, a state of misapprehension, as the incoming ruler imagines himself going through the "mountain of separation," he undergoes initiation to be cured of

misapprehension (or the lack of ruling wisdom) at the hands of the Nsaku ne Vunda, to be endowed, separated from the general kind of wisdom, to the wisdom of kings, which qualifies one for leadership. It sends a message to the public that leadership is not easily acquired, that there is a test to ruling. Thus, the story creates an impression on the young, something to be aspired to, an emblem in the imagination motivating them to commit to paths of service as a life choice.[51]

When a ruler dies, that is not ground for the election of a new ruler *per se*. The conditions for a new ruler are that a great calamity, drought, or such condition must first befall the people or land. The elders then call the diviner, who exhorts the villagers on royal election, reminds them of ancient principles, which if kept will bring order and balance in the life of the communities. In this context the metallurgist intervenes in the continuity of the kingly line, he also intervenes in the spirit realm. Once a candidate is identified, a smith officiates over the initiation; the smith under this state duty becomes what Mertens calls the *Forgeron Consecrateur* (the Consecrator-Forger).[52]

Nzundu—the smiths hammer/anvil

The process of selecting a suitable anvil, which must be a river stone, is part of the initiation of the smith. It becomes the *simbi* of his location. It does not move even when the smith moves. If he relocates, he searches for a new one and consecrates it for his new dwelling, a *simbi* of a new location. There is a connection between the spirits that dwell in the rocks on the rivers, the metalworker, and the king. It is the *Forgeron Consecrateur* who is the bridge between the king and the ancestral line. "The smith grants the king access to the ancestors of the royal line, to the nature spirits, and the autochthonous *Nsaku* clan from whom he claims descent."[53]

Nyamakalaw of the Mande

In the Mande society, the tendency was for boys to be selected to become smiths at around ten years of age. They would then undergo tutelage and become disciples of the master crafter. The achievements related to the training were also musical; mastering how to get bellows pumping at appropriate rhythmic metre, they must learn songs—smithing songs. They also acquire some knowledge of healing and medicine, and woodwork, which is generally regarded as pre-training for ironworking.[54]

Before colonialism, Mande were primarily divided into three ranks: farmers and elders were the first group, specialized crafters were another group, and slaves were the third group. The first group remained influential; leaders came from this class. The group of crafters was called *nyamakalaw* the term can be broken down as follows:

- Nyama = life force, evil, omen, defilement
- Kala = make, handle, which may come from ke-la, to pick water, to funnel something. [in Zulu ke-la (khela) would be to pick water or a stick]

To give an overall definition of the term *nyamakalaw* is very difficult as all the explanations are influenced by the social position of those giving the statement; in the most basic level, they are people who hold monopoly on certain social acts. The group of crafters included storytellers, bards, leatherworkers, potters, etc. They played a vital role in the economic, religious and political cultures in the areas where they live. In Sudan the Mande ironworkers were kept as ambassadors, advisors, interpreters. The role of ironworkers was circumscribed in the social contract which existed between the noble clans and *nymakalaw*. There is a suggestion that some past alliance or treaty forbade the crafters from ascending to political power, in exchange for protection and autonomy. This relationship may have become naturalized over time. Another reason of importance in the ideological separation of crafters, is that practices such as iron

were associated with divine inspiration. There is a suggestion that this delicate position of divine inspiration required "liminality in kinship relations and social status."[55] One of the things the *nyamakalaw* are said to have is mastery over "nyama" and the knowledge of trees (jiridon). This is perceived to endow him with powers potentially destructive to the world. For the Mande, the griots and smelters are understood to share the power over *nyama* (life force) believed to be epitomized in spoken words and natural material. It has also been suggested that with the *nyamakalaw* they identify more with specialization than with the notion of ethnicity.

What Can We Learn for KwaZulu-Natal Craft Specialist of *Ubunyanga*

Well one thing I can say that what has been most arresting for me in the reviewing of the literature from other parts of the African continent is the mythical concept of the *bisimbi*, who are the nature and wild-life spirits, who are believed to dwell in trees, rocks, and other nature objects. In the section on BaKongo, I mentioned how the smelter was required to arrive at a new home and then consecrate a new *simbi*, which was a rock to be used as an anvil. It makes sense that the nature spirit dwelling in the object would be so emphasized that it needed to be consecrated. In Zulu/Xhosa the word we use for iron is *insimbi* or in Sotho *tsipi*. The relation of this word and the concept of *bisimbi* of the BaKongo is undoubtable. This may not suggest some possible primordial unity between the southern and African nations further north. But what it does indicate is the power and resilience of those concepts (both artisanal and mystical) and their movement across territories and epochs. A conclusion we can draw is that ironworking in Africa is a very old craft. And the fact that there is similarity and convergence in the mythical (and linguistic) concepts, over such a wide distance, suggests that

knowledge on African craft specialization was shared, over an unusually wide area.

But I wish to at some point to investigate the character of the short-person, the mythical figure called in Zulu *utokoloshe*/*umkhov*u, (a figure is evident in KwaZulu-Natal myths around healing, ironwork and is inferred in myths from other parts of the continent). The baKongo talk of the *mbaka*, while in other areas even the designation *bisimbi* can be used for these short creatures who assist in ironmaking and medicine. Sometimes the mythical figure of short-person is compared with the historical community of the baTua (Tua/twa literally meaning "bush people"), who are the forest dwelling people, short in stature. In Zulu/Xhosa when we talk of abathwa, we are also referring to Khoekhoe, San and other communities. So for me this tells me that term *abathwa* may have migrated southwards and become a designation of those who did not fit the agriculturalist mode of existence. Even in South Africa today, in the Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal you still find districts or communities widely known for their gifts in music to credit this knowledge from the fact that their ancestors had interacted and intermarried with "abathwa" in the past.

As a designation for communities-on-the-move, the term may then be an example of a social distinction going back to before the European colonial confrontation. What is important is that as communities arrived and declared other people "abathwa" they simultaneously were implying a separateness to their own identity, and perhaps this may be viewed in the same way as the ancient Romans who ruled over the Barbarian clans. The Romans had a poor opinion of Barbarians in terms of civilization and sophistication. People rule differently when they believe themselves to have superior technology, language, and cultural development. When we are prompted to investigate the sources of African identity, we may do well then to probe these kinds of longer confrontations as well. It is not a kind of regression or retribalization, but the aim is self-evaluative, to have a more comprehensive frame of how we got to the identities we have today. Expressions

of being “First People,” or the original inhabitants may have something to do with the claim of custody over certain mystical and technological processes, rather than genuine beliefs in ethnic purity. The convergence of such territorial claims with technological mastery shows us that the formation of regional identities was informed by notions of expertise rather than beliefs in racial types. We would do well to keep this in mind in the assessment of African identities today. An increasingly interconnected African continent, in the context of an integrated global, requires a dynamic perspective.

Notes

1. Archie Mafeje, *In Search of an Alternative: A Collection of Essays on Revolutionary Theory and Politics* (Harare: Sapes Books, 1992), 1. ↩

2. This paper was inspired by my involvement in the project “Recentring AfroAsia: Musical and Human Migrations in the precolonial period 700–1500 AD.” The project, hosted at the University of Cape Town, involved a number of universities in Africa and India. I had set it up as my task to investigate activities in KwaZulu-Natal, a province on the east coast of South Africa, which is where I come from. Historically, the area was occupied by diverse populations speaking closely related languages broadly recognized as “khuluma” and “thefula” speeches; today, however, due to colonial, technological and lexicographic transformations the language that dominates in KwaZulu-Natal is isiZulu, which is but one language fitting under the broader categories. See Thokozani Mhlambi, “African Pioneer: K. E. Masinga and the Zulu ‘Radio Voice’ in the 1940s,” *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* 26, no. 2 (2019): 210–230. Also see the research project website for more information: “Re-centring AfroAsia: Musical and Human Migrations in the Precolonial Period 700–1500 AD,” University of Cape Town, accessed 15 April 2023, http://www.afroasia.uct.ac.za/. ↩

3. The work was broadcasted through a collaboration that involved Afropolitan Explosiv in KwaZulu-Natal, Cité International des Arts in Paris, Baxter Theatre in Cape Town and the Recentring AfroAsia Migrations project at the University of Cape Town. ↩

4. The work has been showcased in Tunis in Tunisia, Cape Town, Durban and Johannesburg all in South Africa. ↩

5. Tal Tamari, “The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa,” *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991) 221-250. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700025718 < https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853700025718> ; J. O. Vogel, “Foreword,” in *Ancient African Metallurgy: The Sociocultural Context*, ed. M. S. Bisson, S. T. Childs, P. de Barros, and A. Holl (Oklahoma: Walnut Creek, 2000), xiii–xviii; Sandra Blakely, *Myth,*

Ritual, and Metallurgy in Ancient Greece and Recent Africa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

6. Nefarious reasons include the division of human varieties into racial types, the elaboration of state-led ethnic divisions, culminating in what became known as Bantu development policy in the 1950s under apartheid.

7. W. H. I. Bleek, *A Comparative Grammar of South African Languages* (London: Trübner & Co, 1862). Also see Raymond O. Silverstein, "A Note on the Term "Bantu" as First Used by W. H. I. Bleek," *African Studies* 27, no. 4 (1968): 211–212.

8. Malcolm Guthrie (1962 & 1963)

9. Christopher Ehret, "Bantu Expansions: Re-Envisioning a Central Problem of Early African History," *The International Journal of African Historical Studies*, 34, no. 1 (2001): 10.

10. Roland Oliver, "The Problem of the Bantu Expansion," *Journal of African History* 8, no. 3 (1966): 371.

11. Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, I," *History in Africa* 6 (1979): 287–333; Jan Vansina, "Bantu in the Crystal Ball, II," *History in Africa* 7 (1980): 293–325; Jan Vansina, *Paths in the Rainforests: Toward a History of Political Tradition in Equatorial Africa* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1990).

12. D. A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 100.

13. Samwiri Lwanga-Lunyigo, "The Bantu Problem Reconsidered," *Current Anthropology* 17, no. 2 (June 1976): 283.

14. W. Emmanuel Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," in *Person and Community: Ghanaian Philosophical Studies, I*, ed. Kwasi Wiredu and Kwame Gyekye (Washington D.C.: The Council for Research in Values and Philosophy, 2010), 57.

15. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 41–42.

16. Adrian Koopman, "Lightning Birds and Thunder Trees," *Natalia* 41 (2011): 40–60.

17. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 41.

18. Abraham, "Sources of African Identity," 46–47.

19. Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind (La Pensée Sauvage)* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1962), 9.

20. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 16.

21. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind,* 22.

22. Walter Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy in Negro Africa* (Menasha, WI: George Banta Publishing Company, 1937), 19. ↩

23. Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 17, 19. ↩

24. Writing on Akan language and practices, Gyekye has criticized the tendency to view traditions of African thought in ways that are not individuated/pluralistic:

    A communal society can produce only communal (collective) thought. Because the communal society, it is alleged, does many (if not all) things together, it must therefore also 'think' together and think the same thought. This kind of reasoning assumes that individuality is completely absorbed in the communal apparatus.

    Kwame Gyekye, *An Essay on African Philosophical Thought: The Akan Conceptual Scheme* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987). ↩

25. Tal Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," *Journal of African History* 32, no. 2 (1991): 221–224. ↩

26. The reader will note here that many of the communities mentioned here are not even considered as part of the Bantu group, and yet there exist remarkable conceptual and practical resemblance in the convening of spaces of technological and mythical work. ↩

27. Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 223–224. ↩

28. Discussed in "Uhambo lease Mgungundlovu" (Voyage to uMgungundlovu), Presented at the Archive & Public Culture Research Workshop, University of Cape Town, 8–10 November 2023. ↩

29. Tamari, "The Development of Caste Systems in West Africa," 239. ↩

30. Thokozani N. Mhlambi, "Sound in Urban Public Space: Loudspeaker Broadcasts in Johannesburg and Durban in South Africa, 1940s," *Cultural Studies* 35 (Feb 2020): 959–978. ↩

31. "Africa and its metalworkers appear always to have been part of a world system." J. O. Vogel, "Foreword," in *Ancient African Metallurgy: The Sociocultural Context*, ed. M. S. Bisson, S. T. Childs, P. de Barros, and A. Holl (Oklahoma: Walnut Creek, 2000), xiii–xviii. ↩

32. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual, and Metallurgy*, 2. ↩

33. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy,* 2–3. ↩

34. Blakely, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 3–4. ↩

35. See Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 64. ↩

36. Thokozani N. Mhlambi, "Izinyanga: Disappearance and Re-emergence" (unpublished manuscript, November 2021). ↩

37. See David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1996). ↩

38. John W Colenso, *Zulu-English Dictionary* (Pietermaritzburg: P Davis, 1861). ↩

39. T. Maggs, "'My Father's Hammer Never Ceased Its Song Day and Night': the Zulu Ferrous Metalworking Industry," *Natal Museum Journal of Humanities* 4 (1992): 65–67. ↩

40. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 64. ↩

41. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 172. ↩

42. Louise Iles and Edwinu Lyaya, "Making Metals in East Africa and Beyond: Archaeometallurgy in *Azania*, 1966–2015," *Azania: Archaeological Research in Africa,* 50, no. 4 (2015). ↩

43. See Henry Callaway, *The Religious System of the Amazulu* (Cape Town: C Struik Publishers, 1870). ↩

44. Iles and Lyaya, "Making Metals in East Africa and Beyond," 482. ↩

45. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 22, 23. ↩

46. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 23. ↩

47. Z. K. Matthews, "A Short History of the Tshidi Barolong," *Fort Hare Papers,* A2.42, June 1945, Archives and Special Collections, University of South Africa. ↩

48. Cline, *Mining and Metallurgy,* 22, 23. ↩

49. Eugenia W. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power: Rituals of Transformation in African Societies* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993), 138. ↩

50. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 181–183. ↩

51. Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power*, 139–140. ↩

52. Joseph Mertens, *Les Chefs couronnés des Bakongo orientaux* (Brussels, 1942). See also Herbert, *Iron, Gender, and Power,* 136–137. ↩

53. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 187. ↩

54. Blakeley, *Myth, Ritual and Metallurgy*, 172–175. ↩

55. David C. Conrad and Barbara E. Frank, *Status and Identity in West Africa: Nymakalaw of Mande* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995). ↩

Author Information

Thokozani N Mhlambi

Thokozani Ndumiso Mhlambi, a musician, songwriter, and cultural pioneer, was born in South Africa on September 18, 1984. Mhlambi became well-known for his concert-lecture performances, which he began doing in 2016 at the Mazisi Kunene Museum in Durban. For the performance at the museum, Mhlambi was nominated for the National Institute for Humanities and Social Science Creative Prize in 2018. Mhlambi has created his own distinctive presentations that blend engaging performances with critical thought. He frequently does solo concerts on his baroque cello and vocals on stage. He frequently works with orchestras and groups in North America and Europe. Mhlambi is a cultural thinker who has a strong sense of community and how the local and global connect. He builds artistic visions using an internationalist methodology, which is inspired by the ground-breaking work of Pan-African philosophers like C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, H. I. E. Dhlomo, and Paulo Freire. Mhlambi's creative influences come from those who created the tradition of African anthems, such as Reuben Caluza, Ntsikana, John Knox Bokwe, and Enoch Sontonga, to name a few. These individuals modernized tradition in the same way that the Ancient Greeks did by creating an ethos of mousike. He draws inspiration from folk musics from throughout the world to develop his own unique style.

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“Whose house? Our House!”: Streaming Revolution During the US Capitol Riot

by James N. Gilmore, Madeline Hamer, Valerie Erazo and Patrick Hayes | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT This article analyzes videos shared during the United States Capitol riot on January 6, 2021, where supporters of then-President Donald Trump stormed the US Capitol Building in an attempt to disrupt the certification of Joseph Biden’s presidential victory. We analyzed videos distributed on Facebook, Twitter, Parler, Snapchat, DLive, Twitch, and Periscope to examine how participants structured a narrative of their actions as a form of political revolution. We assess how these videos draw on affective configurations to demonstrate the ways that cultivation of affect helps to drive far-right dissent, and we assess the role of media technologies in recording and sharing those affects across networked publics.

KEYWORDS Capitol riot, affect, dissent, livestreaming, riot, social media

This article uses an archive of videos distributed across seven different social media platforms throughout January 6, 2021 to demonstrate how the participants in the United States Capitol riot were using their mobile phones, wearable cameras, and associated digital platforms to produce an aesthetic that aimed to narrativize their actions as patriotic and historically connected to what they perceived as founding national principles of protest against the state.[1] This article draws from cultural studies’ use of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s “assemblage” to consider the complex, ever-multiplying forces contributing to the production of the Capitol riot and does so through a focus on the documents

videographers recorded and distributed online.[2] In doing so, we demonstrate how particular aesthetic forms, including selfies and crowd shots, are repeatedly used as part of the production of affective narratives of collective action and political revolution.

The initial research period for this study was January 2021 through May 2021. Several weeks after the riot took place, we located an archive of social media files which had been scraped and stored by a team of anonymous data hoarders. Our method section details how we approached this data set and how we analyzed it, but our understanding of the Capitol riot emerged conterminously with the rest of the United States and the world. As we were writing the initial draft of this manuscript, Donald Trump was being impeached in the US Congress for inciting violence. In the time between the article's completion and its publication, the January 6 Committee of the US Congress presented publicly its findings from the day, many participants in the riot have been arrested and convicted on charges including sedition, and a complex set of still and moving images have emerged as representational of this event.[3] An inherent limitation of this article is its attempt to write about a historical moment in its immediate aftermath, but this analysis should be seen as existing independently from public testimony like that in the January 6 Committee hearings, although readers of this article will undoubtedly and necessarily put them—as well as other research about the Capitol riot which has flourished in the years between this article's initial research period and its publication—in conversation with this research.[4]

This article proceeds first with a section on contextualizing the Capitol riot and reiterating its importance as an event, as well as how we use assemblage as a means of contextualizing and analyzing the event. We then situate the Capitol riot within existing research on far-right political movements and the development of networked public spheres, drawing from literature on the intersections of protest culture and social media as well as the use of affect theory to study Trumpism. From there, we detail our interpretive method and analyze representative

examples from the Capitol riot across an array of platforms to demonstrate how participants narrativized populist-nationalist affects through their shared videos. We conclude by considering what these examples might indicate about the importance of these aesthetics and narratives for studying the broader contexts of far-right political-cultural practice.

Contextualizing the Capitol Riot

On January 6, 2021, supporters of then-president Donald Trump marched on the United States Capitol Building to disrupt the certification of Joseph Biden's presidential election victory. Stoked by two months of claims from Trump and his allies that the election had been stolen and rigged with no evidence to support such claims, the so-called "Stop the Steal" movement brought thousands of people to Washington, DC in support of the baseless belief that Trump should rightfully remain president.[5] On right-wing social media platform Parler, advertisements and videos supporting the event called it "the biggest event in Washington DC history" and called on participants to "Fight for Trump. Save America. Save the World."[6] Following speeches from political surrogates and from Trump himself, who directed individuals to march to the Capitol and "fight like hell, and if you don't fight like hell, you're not going to have a country anymore," the demonstrators breached Capitol barricades, fought with police officers, and broke into the building, forcing the evacuation of Congress for hours.[7] In all, five deaths were attributed to the event, which we call—borrowing from mainstream news framing—the Capitol riot.

Trump's speech became the subject of an impeachment proceeding against him, where members of the US Congress debated whether it amounted to incitement of violence, ultimately voting to acquit him of this charge.[8] However, the language Trump uses—not only encouraging supporters to "fight," but also claiming their country is at stake of vanishing—explicitly invokes a form of populist nationalism

that was central to his candidacy and his political agenda throughout his presidential term.[9] Trump's generation of affect (particularly forms of grievance), and his consolidation of authority in his own figure, are emblematic of how he has presented himself as a leader of various "wronged" demographics, an elitist outsider capable of returning America to a purposefully vague "greatness" "again." This populism is discussed in more detail below. The Capitol riot brought together many of the forces that pervaded US political culture during Trump's presidency, which Jeppesen, Hoechsmann, and ulthiin have characterized as a "flashpoint moment."[10] From its fomentation on social networking sites and message boards (including Trump's Twitter account), to its connection to the proliferation of conspiratorial thought (e.g., the QAnon movement),[11] to its spread through an ongoing delegitimation of expertise and research which Lawrence Grossberg has called the "crises of knowledge,"[12] the Capitol riot crystallizes an ongoing assemblage on the American right.[13] Paul Smith has characterized this as a dialectic constitution between "primitive" and "progressive" at the core of how the United States has defined itself.[14] Importantly, the participants in the Capitol riot are not just a scattershot set of disparate elements of the far right, conspiracy theorists, or members of the Tea Party or other established far-right political organizations. They also include members of militias and paramilitary groups, small business owners, trade workers, and other members of the working classes. This assemblage resists easy classification. We draw "assemblage" from the work of Deleuze and Guattari—and the take-up of this theory in cultural studies through scholars like Lawrence Grossberg, J. Macgregor Wise, and Jennifer Daryl Slack. In cultural studies, "an assemblage is a particular constellation of articulations that selects, draws together, stakes out, and envelops a territory that exhibits some tenacity and effectivity."[15] For our purposes, then, assemblage describes the many connecting points across participant identities, political groups, ideologies, media technologies, and the like which have been drawn together to produce "the Capitol riot" as an event.

This article analyzes how participants in the Capitol riot recorded and shared video content on social networking, live-streaming, and messaging applications as one means of supporting the narrative that the Capitol riot was an expression of Trump's populist nationalism. Through these videos, we trace the participants' patchwork attempts at producing a revolutionary aesthetic, a means of presenting oneself as a populist insurrectionist through costumes, speech, and filming styles in an attempt to legitimize and narrativize the Capitol riot through purposefully vague conceptions of "the people" and "the country." The participants whose videos we analyzed were not only interested in particular political outcomes; they were also interested in producing affective media that consciously drew on the affordances of smartphones and online networks to produce and distribute representations of political revolution across a constellation of platforms.[16] In other words, these participants are cultural producers working to generate affective media. While they have various levels of intent, organization, and sophistication, the analysis below demonstrates they valued the act of using social media platforms to distribute videos to build affect and narrative coherence around the Capitol riot. Far-right groups use online platforms as part of political practice;[17] participants use camera technologies to build narratives during moments of violent dissent. Our analysis of how these videos produce an aesthetic builds on other analysis of content shared during protest movements.[18]

"We are Trump": Affects and Aesthetics of Revolution

The Capitol riot is part of a wider assemblage of far-right political participation, one which draws on and connects to particular understandings of US history, to populist politics, to religion, to sport, and even to fandom more broadly. Researchers on far-right and reactionary politics have examined how message boards like 4chan,[19] overtly white nationalist sites like Stormfront,[20] Reddit

boards like r/The_Donald (which promoted right-wing extremist content related to Donald Trump),[21] and video sites like YouTube[22] participate in manipulation and disinformation which may help normalize extremist ideologies.[23] Each platform has been used for varying purposes, and studies of protest cultures over the last decade have comparatively sketched how practices evolve and iterate on different platforms.[24] Twitter's mode of hashtag activism,[25] for instance, differs from how conspiratorial thinking emerges through trolling on 4chan.[26]

Zeynep Tufekci has called these—in relation to the protests in Tunisia and Egypt in the late 2000s and early 2010s—networked public spheres,[27] an iteration of Habermas's history of the emergence of "public spheres," or semi-public spaces like *salons* where members of political and socioeconomic groups could come together and discuss prevailing issues.[28] For Tufekci, digital public spheres act as imagined communities, drawing together people who have likely never met in solidarity over ideological commitments.[29] Platforms ranging from Facebook to Parler to 4chan coordinate actions in physical spaces.[30] During protest events like the Capitol riot, these spheres can act as "spreadable media" where shared video content forms the basis of how these events are learned about and understood.[31] In engaging networked public spheres, participants leverage recording technology as a means of "representing reality" not only in the sense of the documentary image's indexical relationship to what has happened in front of the camera lens, but also in the presentation of a reality that baselessly casts the US Congress as a treasonous body needing to be violently reclaimed.[32]

These representations rely on aesthetics. In his vocabulary entry on "aesthetics," Raymond Williams points out that even though the concept is predominantly connected to "social or cultural interpretations" of art, its origins are in "the conditions of sensuous perception," or the production of sense and sensation.[33] Whether based in interpretation or sensation, aesthetics have always had political dimensions. Political aesthetics have become a necessary feature of protest movement analysis.[34] Research traversing (in the United States alone) the Tea

Party,[35] Occupy Wall Street,[36] and Black Lives Matter[37] have all noted the vital role of mobile and internet-connected cameras for crafting artistic and affective understandings of the ideologies underpinning these movements. Thomas A. Ratliff and Lori Hall have argued, for instance, that all protest activity in the US is to some degree aesthetic.[38] Kari Andén-Papadopoulos has noted a global rise in "citizen camera-witnessing" as a way to document dissent and opposition.[39] There is a general recognition that aesthetics play a key role in how protests develop across networked public spheres.

The "Stop the Steal" movement was different from many other protests focused on justice, equity, or policies in that its underlying belief—that large-scale election fraud had occurred across multiple swing states to prevent Donald Trump from being reelected—was never demonstrated with viable evidence. The support it engendered was affective, not logical. Mark Andrejevic has traced what he calls the emergence of "the era of the affective fact" which "endows non-facts with their 'truthiness.'"[40] If one believes Trump should have been elected, in other words, then surely he must have been. Aesthetics participate in the production of affective facts; they help them feel credible and trustworthy.

The "affective fact" connects to some of the ways cultural studies has long insisted on the importance of experience as an affectual means of knowing.[41] Kendall R. Phillips has examined resonances between Trumpism and what Lauren Berlant has described as "the orchestration of public feelings—of the public's feelings, of feelings in public, of politics as a scene of emotional contestation."[42] The Capitol riots draw from emotional, rather than logical, contestations about who deserves to hold political power, and the participants use their cameras as one way to channel and orchestrate their feelings. As Donovan O. Schaefer contends, this "affective configuration" in Trumpism more broadly deals with "the thrust and counterthrust of shame and humiliation, leading to the rhetorical power of white defiance."[43] In building a "culture war battlefield," Schaefer argues Trump mobilizes race-based animus to encourage "revenge" against other political and

cultural groups, such as progressives.[44] It is not hard to see this affective configuration at play in the mobilization of the Capitol riot; rather than feel the electoral defeat, Trump and his acolytes encourage a vengeance against the US Congress itself.

This emphasis on affect may suggest some connections to the so-called "post-truth" moment, where individuals buy into what the political satirist Stephen Colbert once called "truthiness," things that feel true based on one's already-existing affective and ideological disposition to the world.[45] However, as Robert Mejia, Kay Beckermann, and Curtis Sullivan have argued, examining the present moment in terms of a crisis of literacy (media, information, or otherwise) "reproduces the myth that we once lived in an era of unproblematic truth and, consequently, intersects with a neoconservative nostalgia for a post-racial past that never existed," framing the present crises as "an epistemological rupture" than an "ideological continuity."[46] The participants in the Capitol riots evince this continuity through their continued invocation of the historical past: flags from the US Revolution and the US Civil War, chants of "1776" and "We the People" are meant to align these individuals with an ongoing project of dissent against tyranny —overlooking the many ways racial politics in the form of slavery were inextricably intertwined with the founding of the United States as well as the Civil War. They mythologize both themselves and their country's past as part of a narrative built on affective configurations of history, identity, and politics. Beyond hostility, post-truth, and affect, Nadler and Taussig have suggested that "social stigma and exclusion appeared to be the unifying conservative reaction to January 6." This "deep story," as they call it, casts "conservatism as an identity under threat of humiliation, social stigma, and formal exclusion," where conservatism becomes a social identity used to mobilize a variety of individuals and groups.[47] Here, conservative news cultures work to promote and unify this social identity.[48]

It is within this complicated affective configuration that the Stop the Steal movement gained legitimacy. The weeks leading up to the Capitol riot depended

on Trump, his surrogates, and his supporters producing a sense that the election was stolen without providing empirical evidence of these claims. Video content producers on sites like Parler further aestheticized the affect surrounding "Stop the Steal," insisting on the validity of the claims through emotional appeals, conspiratorial thinking, and polarized tribalism.[49] Jessica Baldwin-Philippi has demonstrated that Trump's populist ideology developed particular aesthetic forms during the 2016 presidential election,[50] where supporters construct themselves *as* patriots through nationalist (if not nativist), anti-government, and anti-institutional ideologies.[51] This iteration of populist-nationalism derives in part from the emergence of the Tea Party in the US in 2009, with its focus on grassroots organizing favoring anti-liberal and increasingly far right nationalist candidates.[52] Trump's politics, in other words, suggest the institutions of government do not function in the interests of people, and only he is able to suitably care for Americans; this extends, via the Stop the Steal movement, to endorsing Trump's claims that a certified election was stolen.

Taking all this together, we suggest the videos recorded and transmitted during the US Capitol riot can be understood as an aesthetic expression meant to continue narrativizing Trumpism as a populist and nationalist movement within networked public spheres. The participants in the Capitol riots follow the affective configuration Trump established in his speech: they were fighting for a *version of a country* Trump was supposed to (if not destined to) be leading, and they perceived their own transmissions as constructing and conferring meaning to legitimize a populist, anti-government, and violent mobilization of individuals in the name of securing the nation. In the following sections, we first describe our method for studying these videos before turning to an analysis of our sample.

“This is Our House”: Analyzing the Collective Action of the Capitol Riots

The videos analyzed for this article were accessed through MEGA, a public file sharing archive service, and were initially crowdsourced through the r/DataHoarder group on the website Reddit.[53] The lead user aggregating and storing this collection of still- and moving-image media explicitly identifies its sociological importance and the need to immediately manufacture a storage folder for researchers and the public to access.[54] Data hoarders broadly aspire to archive as much of the Internet as possible for human recollection and research.[55] Through the efforts of these data hoarders, we were able to access videos from sites like Facebook that had been deleted almost immediately due to their violent content. As Terri Lee Harel puts it in a study of Reddit users on January 6, “Rogue archiving has saved what might otherwise be lost to content removals and overnight website closures.”[56] The MEGA folder did not provide identifying metadata, allowing us to treat videos as an anonymous and ostensibly random sample of footage from users we could not (and did not try to) identify. For some livestreams, usernames were displayed both in the stream itself and in visible comments from other users; we omitted those usernames here in the name of anonymization.

From the data in the MEGA folder, we analyzed videos from seven platforms for analysis: three live-streaming platforms (DLive, Twitch, and Periscope), three social networking platforms (Facebook, Twitter, and Parler), and one messaging platform (Snapchat). We viewed footage from five DLive users (approximately six hours in length), three Periscope streams (approximately three hours in length), and three Twitch streams (approximately four hours in length). We viewed fifty-eight videos shared through Facebook and the “Facebook Live” feature, which allows users to broadcast a live video to followers or to the larger Facebook community; we viewed fifty videos from Twitter; and we viewed thirty videos from

Parler. We viewed thirty-one Snapchat Stories, short videos of up to ten seconds that disappear after twenty-four hours.[57]

Using crowdsourced data from Reddit forums such as r/DataHoarder does not appear to be a common method in cultural studies or Internet research and is quite different from how sources like Mechanical Turk are used to crowdsource survey research. Because many of these platforms deleted footage from the Capitol riot hours after it began, we could not scrub these platforms for videos when we began research in late January 2021. This access, however, has its limitations, because we fundamentally cannot verify the videos or link them to accounts. Some amount of trust is required that the MEGA folder for videos from Parler are, in fact, coming from Parler. We also do not have metadata such as comments, likes, retweets, timestamps, or other data that could have been obtained from social media analytics platforms. Repositories like MEGA and resources like r/DataHoarder, then, are useful for qualitative researchers who are unable to access relevant materials that may have been deleted for any number of reasons. One potential contribution of this article is to demonstrate the utility of this method of analyzing crowdsourced videos from data hoarders.

We used visual analysis to map both form (how does the videographer use their camera) and content (what is recorded). We made three passes through this material. Each author moved one platform at a time, writing descriptions and verifying co-authors' form and content descriptions. The first pass formed a descriptive layer, in which we summarized content and looked for overall trends in each platform. The second pass formed a comparative layer, in which we assessed similarities and differences across the social networking sites, the live-streaming platforms, and the messaging application. The third pass formed an analytical layer, in which we meaningfully interpreted the form and content of these videos to examine how they embodied the populist-nationalist claims Trump espoused immediately before the Capitol riots. These videos are, on some level, intentional: participants had to take out their phones or mobile cameras,

open preferred platforms and applications, and consciously begin and end their recordings for broadcast. We have not sought to identify participants, as we wished to treat their videos as an anonymous and random sample.

Two major themes emerged in how the participants were drawing on aesthetics to advance narratives about the Capitol riot as they documented it: the riot as collective action, and the riot as revolution. In the former, videographers draw on images of the crowd or consciously highlight their place within the crowd to marvel at the amount of people who have assembled for the riot. This also includes strategies of continuously moving a smartphone camera through space and focusing on individual instances of violence, such as the shooting of participant Ashli Babbitt. In the latter, participants draw on speech, song, and other modes of communication that directly link the Capitol riot to other moments of revolt in US history, namely the Revolutionary War and the Civil War. This frame underscores the nationalist sentiments motivating many participants, while placing Trump as the leader of the nation and emphasizing the broad role of "the people" as agents of revolution.

In the following section, we discuss the overlapping nature of these two narratives through representative examples. We provide descriptive detail while sketching some of the variety of what participants recorded and shared. Focusing on representative examples allows us to analyze decisions in camera movement or speech from individual videos, but this comes at the cost of providing a holistic account of the more than one hundred videos we viewed. This decision is consistent with textual analysis and visual analysis methods, which often emphasize a representative sample of materials to permit the examination of more detail and nuance.

“It’s 1776, and We the People Will Never Give Up”: The Riot as Revolution

In this section, we focus on how different participants utilized the affordances of different platforms. We focus on formal elements of videos to suggest the framing of crowds—and the videographer’s relationship to the crowd—is part of a representational strategy meant to emphasize scale and grant legitimacy to these actions. Different platforms tended towards different kinds of representation: Snapchat, with its ten-second limit, favored crowd pans, while videos shared through Facebook often include videographers turning cameras around to capture themselves as part of the event. This demonstrates how affordances help to enable the modes of production deemed desirable on different platforms.[58] Jeppesen, Hoechsmann, and ulthiin have called these videos “performance crime, documenting their activities as a crucial component of the riot.”[59]

Two users who shared multiple videos through Facebook—who we have called “Sean” and “Paul”—demonstrate some of the ways videographers used front-facing cameras as part of their documentation strategy during the riots. Sean recorded a series of videos between one and three minutes in length as he moved along the police barricade line. In one, Sean says to police officers variations of “I love you guys,” and “Sorry you guys got to deal with this,” before he also turns to yelling at the officers and cheering on the crowd trying to physically fight the police officers. At the end of this video, Sean turns his camera around to film himself admiring the crowd trying to break the police perimeter, cheerfully shouting “We look good, baby!” Sean makes a number of choices here. He identifies sympathetically with the crowd through his posed smile before telling the officers he “hates” that they have to deal with it, and then tries to expose what he sees as hypocrisy: Congresspersons are criminals, and the crowd (the “people”) support justice. Sean’s desire to play it both ways—to be both pro-cop and anti-cop, to both document the crowd and take “selfies” of himself smiling at

the camera—demonstrates how Facebook's modes of social address are also bound up in performances of political identity. As Siva Vaidhyanathan[60] and Blake Hallinan[61] have respectively charted, this is also characteristic of Facebook itself, with its public ambitions of operating as a space of democratic civilization while simultaneously propagating anti-democratic infrastructural developments.

A contrasting set of videos come from a user we named Paul, who recorded himself storming the Capitol. In these videos, Paul only uses the front-facing camera to record his reactions as he meanders through the Capitol. In one video, he excitedly screams, "We breached the building" repeatedly. He wears a Trump hat styled in camouflage, a paradox in that he is not trying to hide his face but rather to broadcast his participation in the riots. In his next video, Paul walks around somewhat more slowly, out of breath, as he says to no one in particular, "We made it you guys. We made history. This is our house. This is our house." In Paul's final video, he looks off camera and asks, presumably a police officer, "Is that where the senators are at?" To which the officer responds, "I can't let you through, sir." Paul retorts, "We pushed our way through already, sir." Paul's footage—focused on his own desire to perform in a particular way—shows an aimless energy as he wanders the Capitol, taunts a police officer, and cheers into his phone while congratulating those around him. Like Sean's videos, Paul's desire to keep the camera focused on himself makes the recording of his actions—and his explicit invocation of having made history—the act of foregrounding himself in this history. Hess contends selfies act across "the complex relationship of self, space, machine, and network,"[62] which are also connected to modes of self-expression.[63] Here, selfies become a formal means of using mobile cameras to insert oneself into what is portrayed as a historical document, a broadcast of an important moment where one's body is literally foregrounded (in close-up) in relation to the crowd. They isolate the videographer from the crowd while also showing them as important parts of it.

In other videos, particularly those taken outside the Capitol, camera pans—the action of moving cameras to the left or right—are used to frame the large crowd pushing towards the Capitol. This was especially true on Snapchat, where ten-second stories efficiently captured the scope of the scene through pans across the crowd. Most videographers seemed to hold their cell phone above their head, pan left or right to capture the crowd size, and then pull their phone back down. In one story, a videographer appears to be standing on one of the outdoor mezzanines of the Capitol filming the crowd below. As the videographer pans to capture the singing of "The Star-Spangled Banner" on the mezzanine, some individuals have phones out and also appear to be recording their own videos. Like the use of selfies above, this is a commemorative mode of recording and sharing, using the Story format to capture what—for the participants—is ostensibly a celebratory moment of collective action.

While the Snapchat stories appear more rushed and amateurish, capturing quick impressions of crowd action, other participants ostensibly viewed themselves as amateur journalists, treating the breach of the Capitol (and the accompanying violence) as something worth chronicling and sharing. Such videos mimic traditional tracking shots—the act of moving a camera through space—which are emblematic of some documentary and news production. The shooting of Ashli Babbitt, a protestor who tried to climb through a broken interior window, serves as an exemplar of this formal strategy, as well as how videographers focused on individual violent moments occurring within the crowd. Babbitt, a thirty-five-year-old woman whose involvement in conspiracies about election fraud were well-documented in mainstream press accounts,[64] used Facebook Live to share her elation as she and others marched towards the Capitol. Babbitt was later shot while standing at the front of a crowded group in a tight hallway; many individuals recorded and shared video of her shooting. Footage on Twitter is blurry and difficult to follow, as videographers struggle to record a visible angle of her bleeding body. Two separate videos from the same Twitter user record Babbitt getting shot and falling back onto the floor, followed by efforts of those around

her to assess her condition and remove her from the hallway. This videographer moves through space to get closer to Babbitt while recording, filming her body while multiple overlapping voices scream for help. In another video, a man yells, "There's an active shooter," beside Babbitt's injured body. In another, a videographer positioned somewhat further from Babbitt's body turns back to onlookers and appears to shout, "They're shooting rounds! They just shot a guy to death over here!" Another video, filmed almost directly behind Babbitt, records her on the floor struggling to breathe and barely moving as those around her try to examine her injury. Babbitt's death, then, is both emblematic of the violence and chaos of the Capitol riots, but also the impulse among participants to document and share as much as they could of that violence, ostensibly in a desire to cover the event from a quasi-journalistic perspective.

This focus on capturing long durations of moving through space is also apparent in the livestreaming platforms DLive, Twitch, and Periscope, where streamers leveraged the ability to recording and broadcast in ways where audiences could not only view, but also interact with content in real time through the chat function in livestreams. A Periscope stream taken near the entrance to the Capitol demonstrates how the ability to move the camera through space captures the complexity of the violence during the riot. In the middle of one stream, for instance, a large cloud of tear gas is thrown from the door, supposedly by police officers, but participants continue to use flag poles to break through the windows. The streamer pans to capture participants yelling "get the fuck out of here" to nearby journalists, who quickly leave the scene, leaving behind their equipment. The streamer moves towards this crowd, recording participants throwing the camera gear (breaking and shattering cameras, stand-up lights, and tripods, while others kick the already broken gear) and one participant shoves an ostensible member of the press to the ground. Towards the end of the livestream, a person off-camera shouts, "we're the news now." The movement through space unites the scenes of one crowd breaking windows and another crowd breaking news equipment, showing multiple ways different pockets of groups were performing

violence against objects and spaces. The Periscope stream becomes "the news," in that it provides to viewers an embedded, "authentic" presentation of the riot.

Livestreaming provides uninterrupted, lengthy runtimes that allow these actions to be chronicled in their flow, with the videographer sharing these events as they manifest in time and space over a period of several hours. Many livestreaming platforms also allow viewers to add comments in real time. In one DLive stream, for instance, comments from the stream add an additional layer of interfacing the online-offline nodes in this digital public sphere. Some comments included, "fuck the blue line [police officers] they don[']t have our back;" variations of "this is our house," and "HAIL TRUMP." T. L. Taylor has noted how the ability to comment on streams allows viewers and streamers to build parasocial relationships, and here those comments are used to solidify ideological identification, as those watching online can perform through replicating the chants and cheers viewed in the videos.[65] The comments work with the camera movements to affirm the value of what is being recorded and to cultivate the aesthetic dispositions towards what was being broadcast in real time into digital public spheres.

This aesthetic disposition also emphasizes the Capitol riot as an act of revolution. To construct this narrative, participants in the riot mobilized a number of recurring strategies, including flags and costumes (placing "Trump 2020" flags above United States flags on flagpoles carried through crowds, e.g.), revolutionary chants ("Fight for Trump," e.g.), and a variety of songs (singing the Star-Spangled Banner after taking control of exterior scaffolding, e.g.). In footage from outside the US Capitol—namely that on Facebook, Snapchat, and Periscope—flags are prominently flown above the crowd. Many of these are explicitly tied to Trump, including his 2020 "Keep America Great" campaign flag, a "Trump 2024" flag, variations of "Trump Train," and "America First," a nationalist directive which was one of the key principles guiding Trump's policy agenda. Other flags draw on revolutionary imagery, including the Gadsden flag from 1775, which features a rattlesnake against a yellow background with the sentence "Don't tread on me"

across the bottom of the flag. The flag had become, since 2009, associated with the Tea Party, a far-right subdivision of the Republican Party, and is here deployed simultaneously with its associations to the US Revolutionary War and to contemporary far-right politics.[66] Similarly, the battle flag of the Confederacy—which has been the central symbol of ongoing debates about its status as a symbol for Southern "heritage," racism, and anti-government ideologies—is also flown in the crowd.[67] Other flags, including "Trump 2020: No More Bullshit," "Stop the Steal" and related derivations, and "thin blue line" flags representing Blue Lives Matter, which is often invoked as a reactionary stance against Black Lives Matter. Where Black Lives Matter calls for police reform or abolition as a means to eliminate police brutality against Black bodies, Blue Lives Matter calls for treating attacks against police officers and first responders as hate crimes.[68]

Participants also wore a variety of Trump merchandise: hoodies, hats, shirts, and other attire emblazoned with "Trump" or "MAGA" are seen in nearly every video we watched across all platforms. Participants also deepened their performance as a patriotic or even heroic one through converting flags into capes, a mode of attire that borrows from superhero semantics to convey heroism.[69] Connecting this costume to the popularity of superheroes, this fashioning of Trump flags as capes signals a sense of extrajudicial authority, "empowering" participants to act above and against legal and legislative structures in the name of supporting Trump's claims to the presidency. Another way to say this is that participants are embracing cosplay, a practice where fans produce and wear costumes based on fictional characters for pleasure and for building shared identity with other fans.[70] The "MAGA costume" briefly sketched here—with its red cap, its multiple flags, and its shirts and hoodies bearing Trump's name and associated slogans—can certainly be interpreted in this way, where the "MAGA Patriot" is its own sort of character that has been created amidst the Trump movement.[71]

A variety of chants throughout the videos repurposed patriotic language. Phrases like "1776," "We the people" (the first phrase in the preamble to the US

Constitution), and “Patriots,” along with crowd chants like “Whose house? Our house” invoke populist claims centering and constructing a version of “the people” which has a right to violently assault the US Congress in the name of securing its own sense of legitimacy.[72] Other chants and cries included “Fight for Trump,” “We are Trump,” and “Hang Mike Pence” (Trump’s vice president), which again draws on language of violence and revolt while focusing the issue around Trump’s persona rather than the interests of the United States as a whole.

One video streamed to Facebook serves as exemplar of this speech. It is recorded approximately fifty feet from the Capitol doors and clearly shows police officers using riot shields to form a barrier and push back the crowd. A woman on a bullhorn on the left side of the frame calls to the crowd, “Everyone, we need gas masks. We need weapons. We need strong, angry patriots to help our boys.” As she says this, one man passes another an aluminum bat; that man brings the bat high above his head and crashes it down onto an officer’s riot shield. Following immediately, another man throws a fire extinguisher at the police officers as the woman on the bullhorn declares, “It’s 1776, and we the people will never give up.” The woman continues to use the bullhorn to rally the crowd around calls for “we the people” to “stand up for ourselves,” during which time shoes, debris, and poles are hurled towards the officers. One individual holds up a wooden board with a long nail taped to it. The violence occurring alongside this speech encapsulates how speakers at the riots encouraged members of the crowd to act violently, framing it as a patriotic duty through an invocation of the declaration of independence against Britain in 1776. This speech and the concurrent attack on officers is representative of larger trends seen throughout all platforms we examined. Participants regularly identify themselves as patriots and congresspersons as traitors. They shout “1776” or “we the people” as part of group chants, and they broadly incorporate this language from the United States’ founding into their actions as a means of justification and support.

Both during the Capitol riot and in the days leading up to it, songs were used to create community cohesion, instill a sense of nationalist pride, and hype supporters to attend the event and amplify its stakes. During the riot, after climbing to the top of outdoor scaffolding, participants performed an impromptu rendition of the US national anthem. The national anthem works here as a binding agent, a means of signifying that this group perceives its actions as patriotic. In another video, a singer performs “Amazing Grace” outside the Capitol Building and somewhat removed from the main crowd, a reminder of the conjunction of Christian nationalism to contemporary far-right politics in the United States.[73]

Conclusion: Revolution and the Crisis of Meaning

Taken together, these videos produce an aesthetic and a narrative about the supposed legitimacy of this insurrection against the United States. The affective dispositions in these videos offer a means of forging solidarity with far-right political practice while attempting to legitimate anti-government narratives.[74] These narratives, which flow between the physical and digital public spheres of dissent, also work to bring other elements into unexpected association and relation, such as particular understandings of US history romanticizing things like the Confederate battle flag alongside practices from fandom like cosplay. These relations are represented in part through mobile phone recordings and digital platform transmission, which help build affective dispositions around violence against the state. These technologies are used, as we have argued throughout, to build narratives about the goal of such dissent: in this case, to emphasize the supposed value of this collective action and to insist on the riot as a political revolution.

While we favored textual analysis to interpret the videos produced on January 6, this interpretation is meant to open towards a contextual understanding of the

role such aesthetics play in broader political crises, such as how (in this instance) populist and conspiratorial ideologies are mobilized to subvert the US democratic process and attack members of the US Congress. These aesthetics and narratives need to be continually traced through the multiplicities and contingencies of complicated assemblages, where different technologies—including mobile cameras and social media platforms—help to enable various forms of cultural-political practice, identity, dissent, and violence. While we have focused on the camera strategies and their connection to the populist-nationalist ideologies driving much of Trump's presidency and his supporters, there is substantially more to be said regarding how these ideologies connect to whiteness, racial animosity, socioeconomic grievances, xenophobia, and other areas of concern which have motivated far right violence in the United States over the last decade. Their relative absence from this article is not meant to suggest these are not important domains for analysis. Rather, our focus on the revolutionary narratives in participant videos during the Capitol riot is meant to provide another layer from which to explore these complicated tendrils of cultural-political identity and practice.

The assemblage of humans, cameras, and platforms this article has charted demonstrates some of the ways aesthetics—as both culturally resonant standards for video production and means of generating affect—are strategies of far-right dissent. Attending to the breadth of this mediation, as we have attempted in analyzing content on seven different platforms, offers a means of mapping the territory of this aesthetic and acknowledging a complex assemblage at play.[75] We want to conclude by reiterating that January 6 is far from an isolated occurrence, but instead must be considered as a conjunctural event: it brought together many different forces, but those forces continue to persist and transform in the wake of the riot. This is an unfolding story about what far-right violence against the state looks like and what kinds of legitimacy it claims, as well as how the production of revolutionary aesthetics exacerbates existing crises in knowledge, affect, and ideology amongst US citizens. To return to Andrejevic,[76] these videographers are

all constructing their own affective facts out of their experiences participating in the Capitol riots, and sending them out through many different social media platforms to help construct networked public spheres that might continue building narratives in favor of violent revolution.Finally, we want to conclude by speculating on the ongoing importance of these videos. While we have analyzed how the videographers represented their actions, and how these representations connect to the generation of affect and narrative through particular aesthetic choices, these videos—and others like them—have publicly circulated in a variety of spaces. As mentioned in the introduction, footage from participants has not only been used to narrativize their collective action as patriotic, but has also been used to surveil, arrest, and prosecute many of these participants. Another narrative that has emerged in the years immediately following the Capitol riot is a legal one, which has described these actions as seditious. As we write this revised postscript following this article's acceptance to Lateral, Donald Trump has been formally indicted on conspiracy to violate civil rights, conspiracy to defraud the government, corrupt obstruction of an official proceeding, and conspiracy to carry out such obstruction.[77] Given how videos from participants have circulated in other legal and investigatory contexts since January 6, it is likely they will continue to play a role in the upcoming legal trial. We hesitate to speculate on what, if any, legal role these videos will have, but their meanings will undoubtedly continue to transform in the years ahead. It may be sufficient to suggest the assemblage we have analyzed throughout this article will continue transforming as it traverses different contexts, especially as these documents of an attempted political revolution continue to be deployed as legal evidence of crimes against the state.

Notes

1. An early version of this paper was presented at the 2021 Association of Internet Researchers conference. ↩

2. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987). See also Lawrence Grossberg, "Cultural Studies and Deleuze-Guattari, Part 1: A Polemic on Projects and Possibilities," *Cultural Studies* 28, no. 1 (2014), 1–28, https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.814825 < https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.814825> .

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https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/us/politics/trump-impeachment.html < https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/13/us/politics/trump-impeachment.html> .

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Making Live through the Gig: The Case of Comfort Taxis in Singapore

by Renyi Hong and Zachary Mun Wei Chan | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Against the scholarly emphasis on precariousness, this article focuses on how gig work in 1970s Singapore was developed with the specific vision of enabling life for the working-class Singaporean family-man. From 1970 to 1993, the taxi company Comfort invested its operations with a powerful vision of the transformative potentials of taxi-driving labor. The gig work of taxis was made to change the work ethic of men, creating workers and fathers who could advance class mobility, nation-building, and the family, raising children who would become ideal workers of the future. Such hopes, however, still relied upon the insecurity of the gig to force the men into adherence. Entangled with patriarchy, nationalism, and familialism, this article examines the compromises exacted through the gig's capacity to make live, and analyses how Comfort's experiment has left a legacy in the ways that platformed gig work is governed today, which needs engagement and revision.

KEYWORDS Singapore, discourse, gig work, history, labor, transportation

In February 2013, Coca-Cola released a promotional video showing a group of Singaporean taxi drivers surprised with a reunion dinner during the Lunar New Year, a festive tradition for the ethnic Chinese that the drivers had to forsake because of work commitments. These older, middle-aged drivers were lauded as hardworking "unsung heroes," workers who sacrificed their reunion dinner to ply the streets to make a living for their families. "I have no rest," expressed a sixty-four-year-old driver who drives twelve hours a day. "I only sleep for about five hours a night before I have to drive again." This trope of the diligent, working-class, older family taxi-man—resonating with a national narrative of working-class

moral luminosity—establishes their deservingness of the prize delivered at the end: a dinner with their families and cover of their earnings for the day.

This impression, however, would be challenged barely two weeks later upon *Uber*'s entry into Singapore. In what would mark the beginning of a decade-long period of "disruption," gig platforms and public discourse would repeatedly present the taxi driver as a relic of an outdated industry. As some of the earliest ads for *Uber* in Singapore suggest, the new driver was to be a younger, hipper entrepreneurial subject, someone who hustles for dreams rather than survival.[1] Articles and commentaries would affirm this transition over the decade, establishing that "the elderly workhorse uncle is a dying breed" and asking "must taxi uncle give way to *Uber* driver" (fig. 1).[2]

By now, such Schumpeterian accounts of creative destruction should well be familiar. Writings on the harms of platform companies extend globally, marking the promises and pitfalls of platformed gig work.[3] Yet, as thoughtful as these discussions are, less attention has been given to nuances of the alternate governmentalities coalesced around the "gig": the capacity of the job, with its conjunct instability, to invoke familialist and nationalist subjectivities amongst the working classes. As the 2013 pre-*Uber* video and its dramatically altered aftermath suggest, what is central to the arrival of platformed gig work is not simply a transformation of work; it also opens a pressing question: *what is gig work meant to do*?[4] In diagnosing the "taxi uncle" as a "dying breed," a shift in the biopolitics of work is suggested.[5] The change in the gig worker's image also relates to *who* gig work is meant to support, and the *kinds of lives* imagined to be cultivated through this labor.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Fig-1-Renyi-Hong.jpg>

Figure 1. Two paradigmatic models of gig workers: the young Uber entrepreneur hustling for her business contrasts against the “taxi uncle” and his family.

This article looks backwards into the historical development of the taxi industry in Singapore to contribute to discussions of platform gig work in the present. What taxis show clearly is that the gig work in Singapore, and to some extent its

neighboring regions of Southeast Asia, cannot be narrowly understood as "work"—a means to make a living. Rather, it is a steering mechanism to create a particular kind of working-class subject and a family. In this sense, institutionalized gig work in Singapore began as a way to "make live," the term referencing Michel Foucault's argument that biopolitics is centered around encouraging particular formations of life through adjustments of security.[6] Surrounding the idea of "gig work" is an imaginary of the gig worker's life, and the purpose that gig work should serve towards encouraging these ends.

Histories and Biopolitics of Gig Work

For the large part, research around gig work has been characterized by what Bingqing Xia calls an "exploitation paradigm."[7] Etymologically, the "gig" refers to the temporary, usually one-night engagement of musicians and comedy performers in a club. In historicizing the term as it is used today, scholars have expanded the boundaries around gig work, drawing its connection to trends of outwork, homework, casualized and seasonal work, emphasizing precariousness, piecemealing, and the lack of legal and institutional support as its unifying thread.[8] Here, a lineage of dockworkers, women and children outworkers in the garment trade, and agricultural seasonal laborers join modern platformed cloud and geographically tethered workers to make up the longstanding chorus of the gig, suggesting that the characteristics associated to platformed gig work are "as old as capitalism, perhaps even older."[9]

This historicization is significant for it points to the longer project of class warfare, racial capitalism, and its influence on the biopolitics of work.[10] Insecure labor has been the reality of many historically and in the present, and the burden of precariousness has never been evenly distributed. Immigrants, racial minorities, women and children, and those with disabilities are overwhelmingly likely to be caught in the negative insecurities of the gig in cottage industries and platforms

alike. Further, the standard employment contract norm has historically been made accessible primarily only to men, particularly white men of the Global North.[11]

Here, we can see how gig work constitutes an insidious biopolitical technology. As Isabelle Lorey argues, the limits placed on access to the Fordist ideal of stable, dignified employment and the family wage reveal how work functions as a patriarchal and racist institutional apparatus of the welfare state.[12] The standard employment relationship characterized of Fordism was not meant to provide protection and security to *all*, but to safeguard a selective portion based on intersectional valuations of life: "to control the precariousness shared among all by striating and positioning dangerous 'others' as the precarious ones at the 'margins.'"[13] From this perspective, the security marked in the standard employment relationship is that which makes live—it is a state apparatus that allows for the welfare of a group to be recognized and safeguarded. And gig work in formal and informal markets, constituted as the "outside" of the standard employment relationship, exercises the other facet of the biopolitical equation: it deliberately precaritizes under/unvalued populations through matrices like race, gender, citizenship so that they can be rendered subordinate and docile in relation to valued and protected populations.[14]

Making Live through the Gig

This study takes on this approach, but instead of examining the necropolitics of gig work, it focuses on the other part of the equation—the capacity to "make live"—to surface different kinds of capital–labor relationships that the gig cultivates. This approach responds, in part, to Alessandro Gandini's observation that a focus on exploitation cannot fully account for the "ambitious objective of critiquing the relationship between capitalism, work and technology in the 21st century."[15] My suggestion is that the experimentality based around gig work platforms that are unfolding in Singapore needs to be understood through the

broader experiments of the gig in the 1970s, which were first envisioned not just to create profit, but as a way to *produce a particular kind of life* for a specific group of working-class and their families. This was not just aimed to enable life but to create conditions by which life itself could be evaluated and adjusted.

The conception of biopolitics was developed by Foucault through a series of lectures where he spoke on how disciplinary power was complemented by a pastoral exercise of power from the eighteenth-century, delivered through the assignment of institutional resources that could influence the mortality of populations at scale.[16] "Bio-power," Foucault stated, "was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism: the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of phenomena of population to economic processes."[17] But here, biopolitics desired not only the brute insertion and adjustment of populations to work. Capitalism wants "growth" in control over populations to enhance economic processes: "it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern."[18] "Making live," or governmentality through the *bios*, by regularising populations to their environmental milieu, to safeguard their well-being by encouraging particular configurations of life, stood here as the new mechanism of governance and subjectivization.[19]

Taxi-driving in 1970s Singapore provides a striking example of how gig work can incorporate such biopolitics. This essay unpacks this by focusing on one Singaporean taxi company—NTUC Workers' Co-operative Commonwealth for Transport (abbreviated as *Comfort*, later *ComfortDelGro*)—which was and remains one of the largest taxi companies in Singapore and the world.[20] Starting in 1970, Comfort had invested its operations with a powerful vision of the transformative potentials of taxi-driving labor. Examining the biopolitics of this case allows us to consider how gig work can contribute to the construction of new population that could open possibilities of experimentation with the bios at its

rawest: a hope for control over not only over workers (to make them hardworking and cooperative), but also over their family and the reproductive stock of the nation.

Comfort's coincidence with the global spread of neoliberal governmentality in the 1970s makes this case all the more interesting.[21] As Veena Dubal documents, the legal category of the "independent contractor" which underpins the gig ascended in the United States during the 1970s, driven by neoliberal ideologies. Courts in America at that time had mapped the figure of the "entrepreneur" onto the "independent contractor," using the former to rationalize the latter. While this move was partly driven by a pragmatic response to changes in employment—by the rise of temping, outworking, and models of leasing—it was also underpinned by a liberal, pro-business rhetoric of freedom and efficiency. Workers "free" from the chains of employment were said to be more independent, efficient, and capable of entrepreneurially seizing opportunities in the "free market."[22] Argued this way, "risk and uncertainty are interpreted as the workers' entrepreneurial opportunity and potential," and the legal status of "independent contractor" ironically became a right to entrepreneurship that must be protected from employment.[23] The influence of this argument can be witnessed in the taxi occupation in San Francisco and New York, which changed from employees to independent contractors after the 1970s. The gig, in this case, can be understood not as an objective category of work and workers, but as a socially constructed legal category that is produced through an intersection of business models, ideologies of work, and power dynamics between unions, companies, and government.

But while decades of Keynesian and welfare protections were undone in America, a different experimental model of the gig was taking place in Singapore. Like in America, a new cohort of Comfort taxi workers were understood as independent contractors, owning, at least in theory, the freedom of when and how much to work. However, unlike in the United States, the primary figure that guided this new

impression of the gig was not the “entrepreneur” but the “family man,” a responsible man with a strong work ethic, who seeks to work hard not for himself but to enhance the potentials of his children. Taxi-work was understood here as gift and bargain: workers were promised uplift and entry into the rapid upward economic and social progression experienced by the country from the 1970s, but they had to, in return, transform themselves into ideal working-class family men.[24]

Returning to the question posed at the beginning—*what is gig work meant to do*—Comfort’s effort at “making live” involves not only the enablement of a particular population; it directs attention towards the milieu of what life and flourishing means and the concessions it demands. We analyze these terms to complicate existing discussions on gig labor, to highlight how the gig can function as a cultural institution, determining not only norms of work or experiences of precarity, but the hopes, values and practices of workers. “Workers’ interests are socially constructed and an outcome of distinct struggles informed by the times, places and scales at which they take place,” Hannah Johnston and Susanne Pernicka write.[25] We suggest that Comfort taxis have played an important role in shaping a cultural narrative of what the gig can and should do—which remains relevant to understandings of the gig in Singapore and Southeast Asia.

Method

The historical portion of this essay, covering 1970 to 1993, relies on a heterogenous mix of materials. Comfort’s corporate magazine, *Comfort News* (CN), the primary internal communication tool employed by Comfort managers, provides a rich understanding of the company’s initiatives and rationales. The extensive collection of Comfort anniversary booklets supplemented these documents. We also drew heavily from news articles sourced from microfilms and digital archives. Most articles came from the *Straits Times* (ST), the newspaper

with the largest readership in the country. Oral interviews, speeches, parliamentary proceedings, and theses amassed by the National Archives of Singapore and the library of the National University of Singapore triangulated the themes found in the news articles and corporate periodicals.

Our analysis focuses on the complexities involved in transforming the gig work of taxi-driving. In this regard, some background information had to be left out. For instance, Comfort and its links to the trade union is beyond the scope of this paper to elaborate at length; we offer only a simplified account to contextualize Comfort's emergence. Further, we use the pronoun "he" to describe the generic taxi-driver. This is a deliberate choice. Almost all—if not all—Comfort drivers in the early years were married men.[26] Gendering the occupation is a way of making clear that the effort of enabling life follows patriarchal and heteronormative norms.

Against other written histories, including the formal historical rendition of Singapore's taxi industry,[27] hagiographies emphasizing the Comfort's role in providing jobs to thousands of drivers,[28] and genealogies of gig work, centred on precariousness,[29] we focus our narrative on the compromises involved in the gig's capacity to make live, emphasizing the complex, mutable ways by which biopower can play out through precarious circumstances of labor.

Disruption: Pirate Taxis and the Arrival of *Comfort*

The emergence of Comfort must be understood in the backdrop of the late 1960s as the newly independent nation-state was ramping up efforts at modernization. Prior to the arrival of Comfort, Singapore was serviced by two major modes of taxi transportation. First, the country had about 3,800 licensed but disorganized taxi drivers.[30] Second, this group was supplemented by a large grey market of an

estimated 7,000 “pirate” drivers who drove illegally without licenses.[31] Most pirate drivers rented diesel vehicles from taxi barons and went around plying in a car-pooling fashion, picking multiple passengers along the same route. Though illegal, pirate taxis were cheaper, more convenient, and covered a wider service area, making them an essential part of the everyday transportation.[32]

A dramatic shift was to take place in 1970, however, when a report submitted by Transport Advisory Board recommended the eradication of pirate taxis. Charging pirate taxis for contributing to the “traffic snarls and jams” in the city, the Board warned that “millions of dollars of public funds” invested into “major road development” could be nullified if this grey industry is not curbed.[33] The infrastructural problem was then mapped onto a labor problem. “‘Pirate’ activities,” the report continues, “are not consistent with the Republic’s aim of building a law abiding, disciplined, tightly knit and organized society for Singapore.”[34]

With this, the clampdown on pirate taxis began in earnest. In what is likely the most intense instance of “disruption” in the taxi industry of Singapore, the traffic police began arresting pirate taxi drivers en-masse, at one point nabbing a thousand drivers in a day, leading to the almost complete eradication of the pirate taxi industry by July 1971.[35] This clampdown operation is significant not only because of its effectiveness and scale. In his reflection, Leslie Wong, who headed the traffic police operations, described the arrests as a “very unpleasant job.” The punishments levied on pirate taxis were, in his view, “very harsh,” especially considering pirate taxis were more of a “social” problem than a criminal one.[36] Those caught driving pirate taxis would be fined and have their vehicles confiscated, which would amount to a significant financial loss that could drive the drivers into debt. Wong even recalls pirate drivers bringing their wives and children to beg for mercy, stating that the arrests could destroy their families. “We are not a public nuisance,” pleaded a driver in a newspaper, explaining that there

are many who are unable to take buses or licensed taxis, who pirate taxis service.[37]

This context is important because it highlights what the orchestrated arrival of Comfort was meant to do. During parliamentary sessions, the Minister of Communication acknowledged that pirate taxis were "providing an element of public transportation service" but their status of illegality was "harmful to the long-term planning of an improved transport service."[38] Comfort was its solution. In the initial years, Comfort especially focused on absorbing former pirate taxi operators into the company, seeking to transform former illegal workers into an organized, disciplined workforce which could represent the progressivism of Singapore's economic aspirations.

For this reason, it is fitting that Comfort was described as a "rehabilitation project" from the start.[39] Comfort was one of the first workers' co-operatives set up by the National Trades Union Congress (NTUC), a large trade union which was making an important shift in identity in the late 1960s.[40] As Soon Boon Chew writes, the problem of unemployment faced after Singapore's independence in 1965 necessitated a change in NTUC's purpose "from a wage-negotiating unit to a nation-building institution."[41] The Minister of Labor, Sinnathamby Rajaratnam explained in a 1969 landmark seminar that the "trade unionist had to be militant" under the colonial regime to combat the injustices exercised by the colonial government.[42] However, the entangled interests of workers and the postcolonial state meant that modern unionist had to attend to issues of "national interest" and "national economy" instead.[43] The battle no longer centered on "a life and death struggle between saintly workers and wicked employers" but issues of "modernization and economic development" which required collaboration between "government, entrepreneurs and workers" that forms the longstanding framework of tripartitism that remains today.[44]

Comfort, as such, was not simply set out to replace and legalize the profession of pirate taxis. Rather, it was an experiment into a new biopolitical model of work: this was a co-operative operating under the umbrella of a new-era labor union that is linked to the government and meant to foster harmonious relations between the government, business, and workers. As Chengara Veetil Devan Nair, the Secretary-General of NTUC, explained, Comfort was created "with the aim of providing a stake in society to taxi-drivers and pirate taxi operators," a group that had previously "no stake at all."[45] This notion of work-as-work, work as merely a means of making a living, was deemed insufficient from the viewpoint of NTUC leaders. Comfort was an experiment into a new labor contract: Comfort taxi-drivers would continue to continue to be self-employed gig workers, but their welfare was promised to be protected by the organization.

Whether driven by the eradication of pirate taxis, or the promises of Comfort, the organization turned out to be a tremendous success. The initial ballot for close to 1,000 Comfort taxis held in January 1971 attracted about 3,700 applicants until the decision was made to restrict it to married men aged 21–45, which reduced the eligible applicants to 2,000.[46] And Comfort would only grow from there, becoming the world's largest taxi organization by 1986 with a fleet of 6,500.[47]

Making Live and Disciplinary Compromises

Comfort's entry had a dramatic impact in changing the perception of the taxi gig. As example, three years after Comfort began operations, the newspaper raised Mr. Choo as an exemplar of the success that Comfort had "in rehabilitating former 'pirate' taxi operators."[48] Recalling his insecure livelihood in the past, Choo remarked on how he was subject to the whims of taxi barons who could raise or terminate his rental at will. Comfort marked a dramatic transformation. "More important than actual earnings," he explained, "is that my livelihood is secure, my

income regular and my future stable."[49] Regularity, stability, and security—these terms stand in stark contrast to the precarious ways gig work is understood today. But there was a concerted effort at this historical juncture to protect taxi drivers, even to imbue the occupation with a quality of what the chairman of Comfort describes as a "career," something that drivers can be "fully committed to.[50]"

This possibility hung on middle-classed traits of proprietorship and acquisition, framed through a philosophy of "cooperative welfarism."[51] Up until Comfort's corporatization in 1993, taxi operators could become owners of their vehicles after paying off their car's installments. Unionist Thomas Harold Elliott explained that ownership fostered pride, skill, and earning potential: owners would take greater care of their vehicles, have the incentive to improve on their service, and receive a larger income over time once installments and rents end.[52] Further, schemes by Comfort, like the compulsory saving scheme, would assist drivers towards accumulating savings for a new vehicle or home. These schemes were paternalistic in that they enforced habits of savings and thrift. But such paternalism also attached the working-class men to imaginaries centered around uplift and the good life—a vision of class mobility ensured through devotion to labor.

However, this is not to say that the transition to Comfort was all rosy. The taxi-gig was especially subject to major disruptive changes over the two decades. In April 1985, for instance, drivers were subject to an "island-wide taxi boycott" when the government enforced a doubling of taxi fares, which led to months of nearly negligible incomes.[53] Policies imposed, like the diesel tax and certificates of ownership, also added significantly to the costs of operation, creating dramatic fluctuations in the income of drivers.[54] The hours of work would have to steadily increase to keep pace with these costs. A driver noted that he needed only to drive eight hours a day to feed his family of four in 1983. A decade later, he needed to drive ten.[55]

Arguably, however, the most difficult challenge laid in the process of self-transformation that Comfort required. At an awards ceremony in 1979, the Minister of Communications, Ong Teng Cheong, remarked that taxi drivers had undergone a dramatic "metamorphosis" over the years.[56] While drivers of the past likely wore "a singlet and scruffy pants with slippers," Ong said, the driver of today is an "English-speaking well attired cabbie, who drives his own impeccable air-conditioned vehicle."[57] This illustration speaks directly to the kind of uplift and improvement that Comfort exacted.

The "Comfort Productivity Game," packaged with a 1985 issue of *CN*, provides a sense of the behaviors expected (fig. 2). Drivers were tasked to be courteous, accept radio bookings, avoid spitting, and to refrain from smoking while on the road. These behaviors are then subject to surveillance and enforced through merits and demerits. On a day-to-day basis, drivers can be booked, reported, and have their license suspended or revoked for not picking up passengers at the front of a taxi stop; parking and gambling at racecourses; and for speaking negatively of the co-operative and the Singapore government.[58] These measures attracted controversy, prompting letters asking if personal choices for leisure should come under monitoring and if it is appropriate to curtail the rights to speech.[59] But the measures continued regardless, deemed a requirement for professionalization.

COMFORT PRODUCTIVITY GAME 康福生产力游戏

HIGHER INCOME AND SATISFIED COMMUTERS

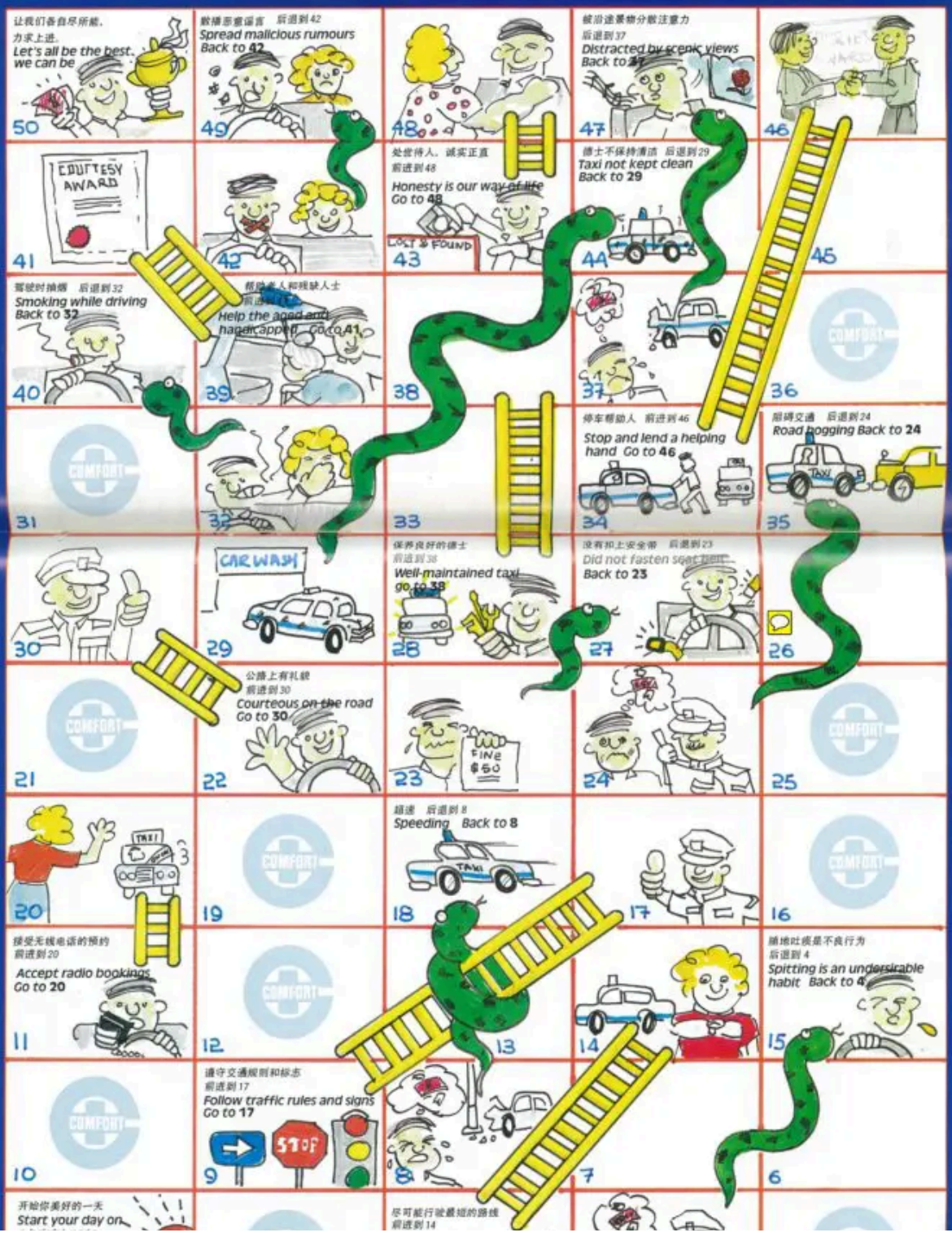
Rules

1. This game may be played by 2 or more players.
2. The player who gets the highest number on the die starts the game.
3. The main principle of the game is: the virtues will bring you faster to success but the undesirable deeds move you backward.
4. If number 50 is overshot, the player will have to move backwards by the number of steps that he has exceeded.
5. When number 50 is reached, the player has succeeded faster as a more productive member and is the winner.

生产力能节省开支，增加收入和提高服务水准。

规则

1. 游戏可以两人或多人游玩。
2. 掷出最大号码的参加者，先开始游戏。
3. 这个游戏的主要目的是：良好行为的人将能步步向前，如果有不良行为，一定得倒退。
4. 如果走超过数目50，游戏者就必须把超出的数目往后退。
5. 当到达50数目时，就成为最有生产力的优胜者。



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Fig-2-Renyi-Hong.jpg>

Figure 2. Snake-and-ladders appropriated into the Comfort Productivity Game.[60]

This demand for improvement is primarily rationalized through an ideology of nationalism. At a taxi kiosk opening in 1982, Comfort's general manager reminded drivers that they are a part of the national "labor movement." And so, unlike the "ill-disciplined and disorganized" pirate taxi operators of the past, Comfort drivers should aspire to be a "well-organized, disciplined labor force."[61] Though "self-employed" and presumably "free," drivers still had the social responsibility to "be well disciplined in their personal life as well as in the rendering of the services to the public."[62]

All these expectations and disciplinary measures relate to the discourse of "weeding out." Used to suggest that only a "small minority" of "black sheep" were harming the interests of Comfort drivers, the threat of "weeding out"—a revocation of licenses—was wielded to demand discipline of Comfort gig drivers.[63] Enforcement of this came from different angles. In the 1970s, commuters were encouraged to write to Comfort to report unsatisfactory service, and traffic police were tasked to catch misdemeanors by taxi drivers.[64] By the 1980s, Comfort would use data from taxi meters, driving records, and accident reports, to determine if licenses and vehicles would be renewed.[65] Drivers were also solicited into this process. When a news agency published reports of "poor work attitudes" among drivers,[66] Ong urged operators to identify the "black sheep in their midst," offering merit points to those willing to inform on them.[67] "No one is forcing you to drive a taxi," Ong chided, "If you can find a better job, good luck to you."[68]

The warning at the end indicates the disposability of the drivers, implying that Comfort is the last chance for these men to come into the fold of national

progression. As previously mentioned, the biopower exercised by Comfort does not follow a straightforward process of "making live"—the promise of protection was coupled with expectations that reveals an ambivalent scene of what "progression" meant, even if one were enfolded into it.[69] Most prominently here, protection was never used to displace the precariousness of the gig itself. In fact, to render the gig "productive," capable of transforming working-class men, these drivers must be reminded of their proximity to a state of abandonment, their lack of worth in the marketplace and the ease by which they can be disposed. In this way, taxi drivers were coerced to internalize the standards expected of the co-operative, with the object of "security" being the stake of their assimilation.

Social Reproduction and the Whole Man

Who stands to benefit from Comfort's initiatives? In this section, we pivot from the experiences of the gig to chart the imaginary of progression forged around taxi-driving. Although drivers were the clearest target of improvement, the transformation of their work ethic was assumed to have broader repercussions. Most prominently, the improvements to the taxi-man is envisioned to flow into a normative nuclear *family*: from patriarchal head, to wives who have finances to care for children, and then to the children who take on the values of hard work cultivated in their fathers. From there, hardworking children are expected to have the will to pull their families out of their working-class statuses, establishing the virtuous cycle of "hard work" itself. As a previous employee at Comfort, Tan How Ing explained, Comfort held on the premise that the "destiny" of the family will change "if their children are doing well through their education."[70] And the success of this vision, Tan suggests, can be seen in the many children that have entered the university.

From this perspective, core to taxi-gig is an attempt to engineer the social reproductive processes of working-class families: to protect families to preserve and hone their multi-generational potential in advancing the family and nation-state. When looking into social reproduction, most scholars have focused on the unwaged, invisible labour of the home—usually done by a woman—that grounds and subsidizes waged work and capitalist processes of production. The patriarchal norm of the male "family wage" in this case is often wielded as a source of power, a means by which the man gains control over family members.[71] We see this enacted clearly with *Comfort*. Most reports on *Comfort* drivers suggest that the wives of drivers were housewives, and when *Comfort* started an initiative to have wives act as relief drivers while their husbands were resting, the drivers interviewed expressed reluctance to have their wives work. "If my wife becomes a taxi driver, who is going to bring up the children and look after my house? A house without a housewife will be chaotic," a driver responded.[72]

Contained within the biopolitics of taxi-driving, as such, is the continued subjugation of women. Women were stopped and discouraged from being drivers (there were 170 men registered as drivers for every one woman in 1988),[73] and they also had to partake in what Valeria Pulignano and Glenn Morgan call the "grey zone" of social reproduction, where families of precarious workers would have to adapt quickly to the fluctuations of their breadwinners' income.[74] Due to the nature of their work, for instance, the incidence of accidents that lead to disability, trauma, or death are not rare, and women left as widows or carers have to cope with raising a family under dire circumstances.

Still, the policies of Comfort highlight a politics of social reproduction that extends beyond gender. Here, the hope for class mobility is placed less on the driver himself than his children and the plasticity they represent. Because the taxi-gig is fundamentally understood to be an inferior kind of work for the less-educated, the promise of Comfort is not necessarily there to guarantee *significant* improvement to the lot of the drivers. Rather, the larger goal is to improve the conditions of the

family that could *preserve* the potential of this populace found through their children. In this sense, though not perfectly aligned with the eugenic legacies of demographic and birth control exercised in the period, Comfort's multi-generational view of uplift still holds to a particular reproductive position that targets the *families* of drivers.[75]

At the most basic, this stance is apparent in the exclusionary standards advanced by the organization. As mentioned, Comfort's initial ballot in 1970 was restricted to married men, and this criterion would stay an ideal at least until 1984.[76] Over the years, questions were raised about this preference in newspapers.[77] One letter-writer to the papers, for instance, lamented that "bachelors will find themselves on the dole" if *Comfort* retains its exclusion of unmarried men.[78] But the non-response to these inquiries suggested that the protection of married men is a matter of common sense: the family was to be the key target of Comfort's protection, not the men. Second, the protection of the family was adopted as an organizing principle for Comfort's welfarism. This plays out most clearly in the welfare programs targeted at children. Comfort invested heavily in study loans, education awards, and enrichment classes. In 1974, the bursaries and scholarships awarded by Comfort totalled $20,000.[79] By 1989, these awards amounted to over $700,000.[80]

But the ideological fusion of the driver and the family went well beyond a monetary figure. Equally significant is the way that Comfort intervened into the non-work domains of both operators and children. For example, gambling was a popular leisure activity amongst drivers during the period, a predilection that rendered them the largest occupational group of illegal money borrowers.[81] Both Comfort and the government had tried to curb this habit. Direct measures employed include a ban from parking at the horse races, the shuttering of taxi kiosks notorious for gambling activities, and an enactment of a moralistic play on gambling.[82] More subtly, however, Comfort had sought to fill the leisure time of drivers with "wholesome," middle-classed activities. Described as being targeted

at the “well-being of the whole man,” Comfort organized events like donation drives, hobby gatherings, excursions, and family events throughout the year, encouraging the productive use of leisure time.[83]

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Fig3-Renyi-Hong.jpg>

Figure 3. Two images from different issues of CN are shown here. On the left, CN features pictures of drivers with their families. This event took place at the waterpark, Big Splash, where at least 300 children participated. [84]On the right, there is an advertisement asking for drivers to join the choir.[85]

The photographic emphasis on the "family" in many of Comfort's organized events, represented through *CN*, shows how the taxi-gig sought to engineer social reproduction not only through the patriarchal norm of the family wage. It had worked in a more thorough way: to school drivers in models of "good" fatherhood. In this model, masculinity is distanced from the antagonistic image of class struggle and attached to a more docile image of the hardworking, honest, responsible family-man. Success lies in providing for children, encouraging their educational attainment, and enabling them to move up the social ladder. Images of men playing with children, and engaging in wholesome hobbies like the choir, illustrates the thorough effort spent to divert working-class masculinity towards that of the family, so that their children can be fully developed in their potential (fig. 3).

This vision was especially reinforced with statistics provided by the Public Service Commission (PSC) in 1979, which noted that 39 percent of recipients of the most prestigious government scholarships over the last decade were children of parents with occupations of the lowest status—manual workers, taxi drivers, and hawkers.[86] What is key to progression, explained the spokesperson of PSC, is not the wealth of families but the innate character of children properly nurtured: "a powerful brain, active glands, and the determination to achieve."[87] Speaking to drivers, Devan Nair expressed that the numbers reflect that "equality of opportunity is a fact of life in Singapore."[88]

This expectation of *protection for upward progression* is so strong that drivers were often seen to have failed if their sons were to drive taxis too. During a parliamentary hearing, the spokesperson for a taxi association, Lim Kim Seng, was questioned when he raised his wish for a legislative measure to transfer his taxi license to his children. The committee appeared surprised by the suggestion, asking: "Would you not . . . like to see your children take up a job with better income, better status than continuing your traditional work as taxi driver? In other words, do you not want to see an upward mobility of your future generation?"[89]

This question is notable for its assumption of Lim's request. For Lim, the transferability of licenses made perfect sense: his son would have a backup to make a living, and the license could be sold if it could be transferred out. But to the committee, the request seemed to encourage mediocrity. This was a view held of other drivers too. Most answered negatively when asked about an initiative that allowed family members to be relief drivers. One said, "Who wants his children to be a taxi-driver? I am sure every father wants his children to do better than him."[90]

However, the investment in generational class mobility obscures how privilege is maintained and reproduced. In fact, the education system was undergoing a significant change in 1979, the same year that PSC released its report. As Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbiš document, the new education policy had formalized a system of ranks and bands, where students were placed into different streams based on academic performance starting at age nine.[91] This caused anxiety in parents who worried that their children would be labeled as "failures," and that anxiety led to an intensification of academic pressure and the normalization of private tuition. Unsurprisingly, this shift disadvantaged working-class families who lacked the time and resources to provide extra coaching. Hence, when evaluating this policy, Barr and Skrbis had described it as "a refined system of elite selection and elite formation."[92] Those who could pour in more resources enabled their children to be streamed into elite schools, which added onto the educational resources they already had. Conversely, the disadvantage compounded for those with less resources and scored poorly. Therefore, contrary to the claim that the "equality of opportunity is a fact of life in Singapore," class stratification was rapidly accelerating at that historical juncture.[93]

In *Abolish the Family*, Sophie Lewis describes the family as an "ideology of work," stating that "the family is the reason we are supposed to want to go to work, the reason we have to go to work, and the reason we can go to work."[94] We see this ideology of familialism play out with Comfort drivers in a strong sense. Their

protection and inclusion into the national narrative is not just founded on their breadwinner's wage and supported by their families. More significantly, *it is the family that rationalizes the value of the gig*. The gig work of taxi-driving was important because it allowed for engineering the family. It enabled the social development of children, who were imagined to become the future workers that would bring continuity to the project set out by the state. At a scholarship award ceremony, a spokesperson said: "There has never been any difficulty in obtaining a good job" for those who are diligent in their education. After getting a job, he continued, most people would get married and "within a few years . . . be able to have a government-subsidized flat of their own."[95] The value of the gig came with alignment to the State project of human capital accretion and uplift.

Conclusion

Protected yet precarious, inclusive yet structurally exclusionary—the gig work of taxi-driving was rife with contradictions during this period. Taxi drivers did not only exist in the liminal zones between making live and letting die; they were guided towards seeing an alternative horizon of "better work" that their children should do. Unlike the "exploitation paradigm," the taxi-gig in Singapore was explicitly designed to enable and foster certain kinds of life—the sort that would be included in an imaginary of national progression.[96] But inclusion here did not substantially transform the way the gig is valued. Instead, the gig continued its negative status: it remains a form of work meant to *preserve rather than flourish*, a last resort for those left out of alternative employment to be enfolded into the Singaporean Dream.

This essay opened at a critical juncture in 2013 when *Uber* entered Singapore. For a while, the gig was imagined differently: a side hustle for young, single entrepreneurs to get some income while they try to get their business up.[97] But as it became clear that ride-hailing platforms were used as an alternative to taxis,

the regulations changed. Seven years later, in 2020, the minimum age of the ride-hailing driver was raised to 30—grafted onto the taxi-drivers who have the same minimum age.[98] The new requirements, a spokesperson said, would "encourage young drivers to gain outside work experience that will enlarge their skill sets and provide them with long-term job prospects."[99]

This regulation reflects the legacy of Comfort. Gig work is still contrasted against the "norm" of a standard employment contract, designed for middle-aged Singaporeans and meant to be taken up as a last resort. Further, the nation and family continue to structure popular imaginations of the gig. During the period of massive COVID-19 unemployment, the platform company Grab released several ad campaigns showcasing workers using gig work as a last resort to support their families. One covered a former flight captain who is praised for having "the courage to start over" to be a driver when flights were grounded.[100] Another showed food delivery workers working and supporting their families, after being retrenched during the pandemic.[101] The 2022 National Day celebration even featured a Grab food courier as the national symbol of an essential worker (fig. 4).[102] In this way, the gig continues to simultaneously normalize and marginalize—it is acknowledged as part of our social and economic landscape, a source for the social reproduction of families, but insisted as a last resort and an inferior form of work.

If the past remains with us, we can also use it to critically evaluate the present. In the present, platforms like Grab have presented themselves as progressive, advancing welfare policies like accident coverage and paid medical leave as evidence of commitment towards inclusive economic empowerment. But these efforts, in many ways, mark only an impoverished reversion to the experiments taken up on gig work in the 1970s to mid-1990s, where union leaders had put in significant effort to reconsider how gig work can be used to "make live."[103] Though not elaborated here, in my interviews, gig workers have repeatedly described the initiatives—reskilling and accident insurance plans, for example—as

confusing as best, and perfunctory and useless at worst. Insufficient effort had been undertaken to seriously build plans that show commitment to the lives of workers. Further, and more problematically, these limited efforts at welfare do not fundamentally change the valuation of the gig. The discrimination against gig work today does not gel with actual changes happening in the economy: gig workers may move from one platform to another, and from task to task, but such kinds of work are likely only to grow and continue being the main kinds of livelihood for many.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Fig-4-Renyi-Hong.jpg>

Figure 4. The three images—first, the flight captain-turned-gig driver, second, a gift from a Grab food delivery courier, third, a food delivery courier who appeared in a video aired during the National Day celebrations—show how gig work continues to be thought of as a last resort for men to feed their families, and how nationalism and familialism continue to be strong ideologies entwined with the gig.

And herein lies the conundrum. We have been critical of many of Comfort's shortcomings. But as an experiment for making live, Comfort did allow many working-class drivers to support themselves and their families and participate in a scheme of national progression. Still, the concessions made in exchange for inclusion cannot be ignored. Much had to be sacrificed to realize the possibility of uplift with Comfort: lives had to be disrupted, men forcefully transformed, and wives relegated to homemakers. The consequences of these concessions may not have been evident in the 1970s and 80s when there was rapid economic growth. But these promises would look frayed by the 2000s, as stagnancy, inequality, and class stratification grew. Here then, we see the most troubling legacies of Comfort. Comfort's culture of paternalism and the suppression of class consciousness has left gig workers with limited collective bargaining power. So, unlike the ground-up strikes occurring in countries like Australia, Thailand, and the United States, gig work in Singapore has largely continued unhindered despite public concern.[104] If workers do continue to work for their families today, it is more a manner of disillusioned survival.[105]

This is not to say that nothing positive is happening with gig work in the country. Singapore is the first in Asia to introduce new legislation for the protection of gig workers in cases of work injury.[106] And there continues to be active interest, as

with countries around the world, to remake gig work so that it can be rendered more sustainable. But focusing just on the limited legislative measures misses something important about the nature of gig work itself. If Comfort proved anything, it is that gig work is not just work. Gig work is a cultural institution, a space to reconfigure capital-labour relationships.[107] Recall the question that guided this paper: *what is gig work meant to do?* Like how pirate taxis were enfolded into Comfort's promise of security and progression, gig work today can be transformed in its value. And as cultural institutions, gig work influences not only the norms and experiences of work; it can be used as grounds for struggle, to embark on the radical reimagination of what work can do for its collectives.

This is a point worth insisting and repeating, lest gig work becomes yet another "problem" to be solved. Yes, it is undeniable that the gig embodies much of the worst problems with precariousness, and it is dangerous to be romantic about the revolutionary possibilities of the gig lest we project our own desires at the expense of the most vulnerable, who have the bear the brunt of the gig's harms.[108] But improvements in work can and should be struggled with for along with a demand for change in how the gig is valued. What is needed is a thorough engagement with the problems and possibilities of the Comfort experiment, and that requires inclusive commitment to the valuation of gig work, to see all lives as worthy of being protected and worthy of flourishing, regardless of the hours that gig workers put in and who the workers are.

Notes

1. Uber, "Singapore | Uber Entrepreneur," YouTube video, June 22, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WAk0ATUU84 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7WAk0ATUU84> . ↩

2. Sam Hwang, *Cabbies* (Singapore: Anthony Ooi, 2017), 10; Adrian Lim, "Must Taxi Uncle Give Way to Uber Driver?" *The Straits Times*, January 12, 2017. ↩

3. As examples see Jeremias Prassl, *Humans as a Service* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018); Jamie Woodcock and Mark Graham, *The Gig Economy* (Cambridge, UK:

Polity, 2020).

4. This article builds off scholarship from the anti-work tradition that supposes work to be more than wages (as examples, see Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext, 2009); Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Renyi Hong, *Passionate Work: Endurance after the Good Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022). The critique of workerism opposes the ways that work is used as a system of economic, social, and political integration.

5. Hwang, *Cabbies*, 10.

6. Michel Foucault, *Society Must Be Defended: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975-6*, ed. Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003).

7. Bingqing Xia, "Rethinking Digital Labour: A Renewed Critique Moving beyond the Exploitation Paradigm," *The Economic and Labour Relations Review* 32, no. 3 (2021): 311–21, https://doi.org/10.1177/10353046211038396. < https://doi.org/10.1177/10353046211038396.>

8. Matthew W. Finkin, "Beclouded Work, Beclouded Workers in Historical Perspective," *Comparative Labor Law & Policy Journal* 37 (2016): 603; Michael Quinlan, "The 'Pre-Invention' of Precarious Employment: The Changing World of Work in Context," *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 23, no. 4 (2012): 3–24, https://doi.org/10.1177/103530461202300402 < https://doi.org/10.1177/103530461202300402> ; Woodcock and Graham, *Gig Economy*.

9. Jim Stanford, "The Resurgence of Gig Work: Historical and Theoretical Perspectives," *Economic and Labour Relations Review* 28, no. 3 (2017): 382–401, https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304617724303 < https://doi.org/10.1177/1035304617724303> ; Veena Dubal, "Digital Piecework," *Dissent* 67, no. 4 (2020): 37–44; Woodcock and Graham, *The Gig Economy.*

10. "The development, organization, and expansion of capitalist society pursued essentially racial directions, so too did social ideology. As a material force, then, it could be expected that racialism would inevitably permeate the social structures emergent from capitalism." The term "racial capitalism," derived from Robinson's analysis in *Black Marxism*, has been used to advance arguments centering race as the primary stratifying factor in capitalism's development. See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1983). For a development see Susan Koshy, Lisa Marie Cacho, Jodi A. Byrd, and Brian Jordan Jefferson, eds., *Colonial Racial Capitalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2022); Veena Dubal, "Wage Slave or Entrepreneur?: Contesting the Dualism of Legal Worker Identities," *California Law Review* 105, no. 1 (2017): 65–123, https://dx.doi.org/10.15779/Z38M84X < https://dx.doi.org/10.15779/Z38M84X> .

11. Jeremias Prassl, *Humans as a Service: The Promise and Perils of Work in the Gig Economy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

12. Isabell Lorey, *State of Insecurity: Government of the Precarious*, trans. Aileen Derieg (London: Verso, 2015).

13. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*, 38–9.

14. See especially Peter James Holtum, Elnaz Irannezhad, Greg Marston, and Renuka Mahadevan, "Business or Pleasure? A Comparison of Migrant and Non-Migrant Uber Drivers in Australia," *Work, Employment and Society 36*, no. 2 (2022): 290–309, https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211034741 < https://doi.org/10.1177/09500170211034741> ; Julietta Hua and Kasturi Ray, "Beyond the Precariat: Race, Gender, and Labor in the Taxi and Uber Economy," *Social Identities* 24, no. 2 (2018): 271–89, https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1321721 < https://doi.org/10.1080/13504630.2017.1321721> ; Will Orr, Kathryn Henne, Ashlin Lee, Jenna Imad Harb, and Franz Carneiro Alphonso, "Necrocapitalism in the Gig Economy: The Case of Platform Food Couriers in Australia," *Antipode* 55 (2023): 200–221, https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12877 < https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12877> ; Stephen Walcott, "Victimization and Fear of Crime in the Gig Economy," *Police Foundation*, November 2020, 31.

15. Alessandro Gandini, "Digital Labour: An Empty Signifier?" *Media, Culture & Society* 43, no. 2 (2021): 377, https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720948018 < https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720948018> .

16. Foucault, *"Society Must Be Defended."*

17. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 140.

18. Foucault, *Society Must be Defended*, 141.

19. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1990). "Governmentality," developed from Foucault's work, is described by Miller and Rose as a means of governing "at a distance." Governmentality involves the creation of a political language used "not only to articulate and legitimate a diversity of programmes for rectifying problematic areas of economic and social life, but also enabled these programmes to be translated into a range of technologies to administer individuals, groups and sectors in a way that was consonant with prevailing ethical systems and political mentalities." See Paul Miller and Nikolas Rose, "Governing Economic Life," *Economy and Society* 19, no. 1 (1990): 1–31.

20. The NTUC Workers' Co-operative Commonwealth for Transport is abbreviated by other writers as NTUC-COMFORT or COMFORT. For reasons of readability, we have chosen to name the co-op Comfort.

21. See as example, Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neoliberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2017).

22. Insecurity, as Nickolas Rose explains, serves as the basis for the neoliberal formulation of freedom. Neoliberalism demands the restructuring of security, to "remove as many as possible of the incitements to passivity and dependency; make the residual social support conditional, wherever possible, upon demonstration of the attitudes and aspirations necessary to become an entrepreneur of oneself; incite the will to self-actualize through labour through exhortation on the one hand and sanctions on the other." Nikolas Rose. *Powers of Freedom: Reframing Political Thought* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999). ↩

23. Dubal, "Wage Slave or Entrepreneur?", 94. ↩

24. As we will elaborate later, Comfort was seen as a way to transform the idea of a working-class male collective. Instead of remaining a union that struggled for rights, the collective would be led by government officials, who would also promise to advance the interests of the collective. ↩

25. Hannah Johnston and Susanne Pernicka, "Struggles over the Power and Meaning of Digital Labour Platforms: A Comparison of the Vienna, Berlin, New York and Los Angeles Taxi Markets," in *A Modern Guide to Labor and the Platform Economy*, ed. Jan Drahokoupil and Kurt Vandaele (Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar, 2021), 310. ↩

26. "More Women Cabbies Plying the Roads," *Straits Times*, January 5, 1988. ↩

27. Ilsa Sharp, *The Journey: Singapore's Land Transport Story* (Singapore: SNP International Publishing, 2005); Looi Teik Soon and Choi Chik Cheong, "An Evolving Public Transport Eco-System," in *50 Years of Transportation in Singapore: Achievements and Challenges*, ed. Fwa Tien Fang (Singapore: World Scientific, 2006), 67–144. ↩

28. COMFORT, *NTUC Comfort's 20th Anniversary* (Singapore, 1990). ↩

29. Finkin, "Beclouded Work." ↩

30. Sharp, *The Journey.* ↩

31. Fong, "Days are Really Numbered." ↩

32. Sharp, *Journey.* ↩

33. Transport Advisory Board, *Reorganization of the Motor Transport Service of Singapore* (Singapore, 1970). ↩

34. Transport Advisory Board, *Reorganization of the Motor Transport*, 23. ↩

35. Leslie Fong, "The Days Are Really Numbered for 7,000 Pirate Taxi Drivers," *The Straits Times*, April 19, 1970. ↩

36. National Archives of Singapore, "Leslie Wong Sze Ying – Oral History Interviews," posted December 2, 2010, https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/043af238-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad <

https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/043af238-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad> .

37. Fong, “Days Are Really Numbered.”

38. Fong, “Days Are Really Numbered,” 10.

39. “Aid for Pirate Taximen Plan,” *Straits Times*, May 29, 1970.

40. Though Comfort is a co-operative, the organizational form differs from what co-op generally means today. Comfort drivers have to enroll as members to have a taxi, but their shares were used more as profit-sharing, rather than means to a vote. Generally, most decisions are made by managers. Management would also listen to issues on the ground and bring it to parliamentary discussion. This system is seen as superior in that union leaders, typically being government officials, could have direct access to government policy decisions. Explaining this, Ong, the Secretary-General of NTUC offered that “Singapore could not withstand the trauma of chaotic industrial relations” and that “to a small country like Singapore without national resources, the slightest cold or fever could become a fatal bout of pneumonia.” What Comfort offers is a stated commitment towards improving the quality of lives of workers, and the co-operative and union would function as an intermediary between rank and file, gathering the “pulse and feelings of the ground” and process it to a “strong voice in Parliament.” See Ivan Lim, “NTUC’s on the Right Track, Says Teng Cheong,” *Straits Times*, May 1, 1986.

41. Soon Boon Chew, *Trade Unionism in Singapore* (Singapore: McGraw-Hill, 1991).

42. Sinnathamby Rajaratnam, “The Crucial Role of Trade Unions in the Modernization of Singapore,” in *Why Must Labor Go Modern: The NTUC Case for a Modernized Labor Movement*, ed. NTUC (Singapore: Stamford College Press, 1970), 25–34.

43. Rajaratnam, “Crucial Role of Trade Unions,” 31.

44. Rajaratnam, “Crucial Role of Trade Unions,” 31. The success of the tripartite framework is mixed. Historically speaking, it is true that Comfort union leaders have had access to make strong appeals in parliament, offering a good basis for collective bargaining. However, not all appeals have led to the outcomes hoped for. The taxi price hikes of April 1985, for instance, were strongly appealed against but not changed, leading to the taxi boycotts that affected the livelihoods of many drivers. (Taxis were listed as a form of public transportation with the prices controlled by the government). The boycotts were so serious that the government was forced to reverse its decision a month later. See “Cab Fare Saga Won’t Be Forgotten Quickly,” *Straits Times*, June 2, 1985. What is clear, however, is that Comfort did become more corporatized over time. The increase in the price of vehicle ownership eventually made Comfort a lessor. The promise offered early on—that drivers would own their vehicles after years of driving and would experience a steady increase of incomes—would be taken away.

45. Chengara Veetil Devan Nair, “The Evolution of a Work Ethic—a Non-Simplistic Approach,” in *Not by Wages Alone: Selected Speeches and Writings of C.V. Devan Nair 1959-1981* (Singapore: Singapore National Trade Union Congress, 1982), 190–99.

46. “NTUC Taxi Ballot: The Married Men Get First Go,” *Singapore Herald*, January 6, 1971. ↩

47. “Big Comfort,” *Business Times,* February 21, 1986, 12. ↩

48. William Campbell, “A New Breed of Owner-Driver Cabbies,” *Straits Times*, May 18, 1974. ↩

49. Campbell, “New Breed of Owner-Driver Cabbies,” 12. ↩

50. “Plan for the 1980s,” *Comfort News* 5, no. 4 (1980): 1. ↩

51. “A Caring Cooperative,” *Comfort News* 14, no. 3 (1989): 2. ↩

52. NTUC, *NTUC Comfort Singapore Anniversary Souvenir* (Singapore: Tiger Press, 1973). ↩

53. B. J. Fernandes, “It Was an Island-Wide Taxi Boycott,” *Business Times*, April 4, 1985. ↩

54. “Special Report: Mr Lew in Parliament,” *Comfort News* 14, no. 1 (January 1989): 5. ↩

55. Maria Siow and Sharon Snodgrass, “Relief that Taxi Study’s on Hold,” *Straits Times*, October 16, 1993. ↩

56. “Smart Cabbies a Far Cry from the ‘Scruffy’ Past,” *Straits Times*, August 30, 1979. ↩

57. “Smart Cabbies,” 7. ↩

58. See “Taxis: ROV Can Be Real Tough,” *New Nation*, November 28, 1974. ↩

59. See Jilted, “Can’t We Cabbies Have Fun Too?” *Straits Times*, May 29, 1980. ↩

60. “Comfort Productivity Game,” Comfort News 10, no. 11 (November 1985): 20. ↩

61. “Comfort Operators Are Part of Labor Movement,” *Comfort News* 7, no. 2 (June 1982): 8. ↩

62. “NTUC Comfort Scholarships 1977,” *Comfort News* 2, no. 6 (December 1977): 2. ↩

63. “Impact of the Co-Operative Movement,” *Comfort News* 2, no. 1 (February 1977): 1–5. ↩

64. “Taxis: ROV Can Be Real Tough,” 1. ↩

65. “Drivers with Records Not Allowed to Replace Their Scrapped Taxis or Buses,” *Comfort News* 8, no. 2 (March 1983): 9. ↩

66. Chua Ngeng Choo, “Cabbies Have Poor Work Attitudes,” *Singapore Monitor*, June 15, 1983. ↩

67. Rav Dhaliwal, “Look for a New Job,” *Straits Times*, June 19, 1983. ↩

68. Dhaliwal, “Look for a New Job,” 1.

69. Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*.

70. National Archives of Singapore, “Leslie Wong Sze Ying – Oral History Interviews,” December 2, 2010.

71. Lorey, *State of Insecurity*.

72. Ban Huat Tan, “6,000 Comfort Taxi Owners May Get Green Light,” *Straits Times*, August 29, 1981.

73. “More Women Cabbies Plying the Roads,” *Straits Times*, January 5, 1988.

74. Valeria Pulignano and Glenn Morgan. “The ‘Grey Zone’ at the Interface of Work and Home: Theorizing Adaptations Required by Precarious Work,” *Work, Employment and Society* 37, no. 1 (February 1, 2023): 257–73.

75. Michael D Barr, “Lee Kuan Yew: Race, Culture and Genes,” *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 29, no. 2 (1999): 145–66.

76. It remains unclear as to how the preference for marriage is applied on the ballot for vehicles. In fact, we were unable to locate past policy records that describe the requirements for obtaining a taxi vehicle. This argument is based on official statements found in newspapers. The last found record came from “Qualifying for a Taxi-Driver,” *Singapore Monitor*, November 30, 1984.

77. “Yellow Top Owners: That ARF Cut Is Unfair,” *Straits Times*, September 7, 1978.

78. “Why This Discrimination against Bachelors?,” *Straits Times*, August 21, 1979.

79. “Taxi Operators’ Future in Their Own Hands,” *Comfort News* 2, no. 2 (April 1977): 3.

80. “A Caring Cooperative,” *Comfort News* 14, no. 3 (March 1989): 2.

81. Brendan Pereira, “Taxi Drivers and Hawkers Mostly Like to Owe Money,” *The Straits Times*, October 23, 1990.

82. “‘Race Course’ Cabbies May Lose Licence,” *Straits Times*, April 30, 1980; “Under-Used, Abused Taxi Stands to Be Removed,” *Straits Times*, August 30, 1978; “Cabbies to Stage Play with a Moral,” *Straits Times*, November 20, 1981.

83. “Well-Being of the Whole Man,” *Comfort News* 9, no. 4 (July 1984): 2.

84. “Fun and Gaiety under the Sun,” Comfort News 11, no. 2 (February 1986): 9–11.

85. “Comfort Choir,” Comfort News 10, no. 9 (September 1985): 22.

86. Poteik Chia, “Devan on New Industrial Era,” *Straits Times*, May 28, 1979.

87. “Most Scholars Come from Modest and Poor Homes,” *Strait Times*, January 1, 1979.

88. Chia, “Devan on New Industrial Era,” 1. ↩

89. Seventh Parliament Of Singapore, “Report of the Select Committee on Land Transportation Policy,” 1990, https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/selectcommittee/selectcommittee/download?id=293&type=report < https://sprs.parl.gov.sg/selectcommittee/selectcommittee/download?id=293&type=report> . ↩

90. Tan, “6,000 Comfort Taxi Owners May Get Green Light.” ↩

91. Michael D. Barr and Zlatko Skrbiš, *Constructing Singapore: Elitism, Ethnicity and the Nation-Building Project* (Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2008). ↩

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Introduction – Towards Third Worlding

by Rayya El Zein and Malav Kanuga | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT In a well-known formulation, Vijay Prashad wrote that, "The Third World was not a place. It was a project." This forum feels out ways to understand and remember the Third World project as a collective horizon of freedom enacted by ordinary people in their daily lives. Beyond the political leadership of the iconic leadership of Third World state leaders and the foundational conferences they convened, we seek to explore how the Third World was lived and imagined. We do so as an invitation to fellow teachers and students to deepen collective imagining through a twin process of learning and unlearning. Formulated as a practice of Third Worlding, this invitation is a proposal to make historical precedents familiar and make progressive visions of intersectional, anti-racist, decolonial struggle strange. It seeks out other ways of calling comrades into political practices by exploring the ways in which Third World subjects imagined and related to each other. In this introduction, we lay out what Third Worlding might offer as a tool for reorientation in the political present.

KEYWORDS Third World, interpellation, media, political imagination, solidarity

We come to this forum as scholar-researchers active in intersecting political spaces. Specifically, we are diasporic writer-organizers in the United States engaged in struggles around abolition, Palestinian liberation, migrant justice, climate justice, and political education. We have come together as editors to explore the historical project of the Third World from the practice of media research and political imagination in movement building. More specifically still, we are concerned with the durabilities of solidarities in movements today and the ways in which they imagine the building of collective power in an uneven world. As such, this forum responds to an urgency we perceive in movement-building

spaces for frameworks not only for critiquing entrenched power, but also for building the power necessary for liberation. In convening this forum, we have asked, What would a critical return to the internationalisms of the Third World project offer workers, community leaders, prisoners, climate activists in the current moment? In exploring answers to this question, we found ourselves pulled in multiple directions. We revisited debates on decolonization and decoloniality. We considered a range of internationalisms that compete for dominance in intersecting political theaters today, from liberal-progressive to radical left. We turned to a radical history of thinkers and organizers considering the legacy of the Third World and related formations (e.g., a fourth world). As we did so, we explored a range of approaches to feelings of defeat, resilience, and struggle. As a product of this exploration, the forum *Towards Third Worlding* offers possible orientations within contemporary political struggle. The point for us has been identifying tools to navigate the dialectic between knowing the past and unlearning the present in a moment pregnant with competing visions for the future.

In a well-known formulation, Vijay Prashad wrote that, "The Third World was not a place. It was a project."[1] His corrective invited readers to look past the contemporary association of "Third World" with "developing economies" or even "Global South" to its history as a twentieth-century political project with a vision to unite African, Asian, and Latin American peoples in leftist, anti-colonial struggle. The legacy of that project is largely occluded in mainstream discourse across the political spectrum—on both the left and the right. With our undergraduate students in mind, one of our intentions in framing this forum around the ideas connecting a Third World was to return readers to this history of a specific leftist, anti-colonial, internationalist political project. As teachers, we think there is much to be recovered by this look to the past and reconsidering of historical narratives.

But the point is not a nostalgic, resurrectionary turn to the past, even one positioned on the left. To be sure, radical historians intimately familiar with the legacies of the Third World project continue to explore these afterlives and have done so more comprehensively than we have room to reproduce here. We share with recent research a healthy skepticism about the political value of resurrecting Third World statist projects as the compass of revolutionary politics.[2] Our turn to the affective tissues of the Third World feels out a revolutionary internationalism less dependent on these statist visions.

At the same time, in the movement spaces we participate in, we editors are inspired by comrades honestly grappling with fatigue and burnout while being suspicious of the romantic valences often attributed to revolutionary resilience. While we know well the merits of the well-known rallying cry *don't mourn — organize!* we wonder actually about the rhythm and texture of this wisdom as we confront the need to do both. We face this most acutely amidst the ongoing atrocities and devastations of Israel's current war on Gaza, as these tragedies compound and combine with other catastrophes worldwide. Whether among political prisoners in Egypt < https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/egypt-lgbtq-activist-sarah-hegazi-suicide-trauma> , in funerals in occupied East Jerusalem < https://www.aljazeera.com/gallery/2022/5/13/journalist-shireen-abu-akleh> , in vigils for those killed resisting the expansion of state violence in Atlanta < https://www.resilience.org/stories/2023-01-24/vigils-for-tortuguita-land-defenders-erupt-in-solidarity/> , the entrenchment of transphobia < https://www.hrc.org/press-releases/hrc-foundation-report-epidemic-of-violence-continues-transgender-and-gender-nonconforming-people-still-killed-at-disproportionate-rates-in-2023> , or in the everyday paralysis of considering the disastrous future of climate change—we, too, acknowledge these everyday sighs and cries of grief and invitations to collective mourning. Our turn in this forum to lesser known histories and affects of the Third World is also a feeling out how to affirm each other's political depression in a different sort of rallying cry, perhaps à la Alaa' Abd Al Fattah's insuppressible *you have **not yet** been defeated*.[3]

Alongside those working to build community accountability in the aftermath of violence, our exploration of Third Worlding is a search for frameworks of interpellating comrades into struggle. When we come to the work of building solidarity from this permission to grieve, we are acutely aware of the way liberal internationalisms today succeed in flattening the world and politics in it.

In this introduction, we lay out what third worlding might offer as a tool for reorientation in the political present. In the summer of 2020, we put out a call for papers from researchers and organizers whose work unearthed less-known rhythms of organizing, collective survival, and collaborative struggle that identified with the worldmaking ideas embedded in the Third World political project. We asked potential authors to consider what might be learned from those immaterial, affective textures that allowed disparate peoples with internationalist visions to see each other. Beyond the iconic state leaders and the foundational conferences they convened, how was the Third World lived and imagined?

The call for contributions asked authors to explore the potential in the notion of the Third World as a project for today's movement making and cultural studies scholarship from an interdisciplinary, bottom-up, and an intersectional analysis. "Third Worlding" resonates at the productive intersection between cultural studies and area studies scholarship that forums at *Lateral* have been exploring (see Cultural Constructions of Race and Racism in the MENA/SWANA < https://csalateral.org/archive/forum/cultural-constructions-race-racism-middle-east-north-africa-southwest-asia-mena-swana/>), while also drawing out resonances of historical memory for political theory and imagination, another thread < https://csalateral.org/years/> the journal is exploring. We intend the forum to be a useful tool to a wider cultural studies readership as the field continues its commitment to anti-racist, anti-ableist, and anti-colonial analysis.

Towards Third Worlding

The term “Third World” frequently denotes a place, whereas “decolonization” has become a placeholder for a political process. The “Third World” has become an imaginary archipelago of locales mired in poverty, authoritarianism, corruption. Meanwhile, everything from universities to skincare can be positively reformed through a mindful “decolonizing.” In the entry that opens the forum, Jessica Namakkal < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/decolonization-and-the-third-world-namakkal/> asks, How is it that the Third World, a political project rooted in anti-colonial struggle, has become completely abstracted from a politics of decolonization?

Negative associations of Third World as place. March 28, 2023: Peaceful protesters against Macron's retirement bill are pushed back by police in riot gear; the commentary compares the scene to Afghanistan. See Namakkal, this forum.

Namakkal leads us through the emergence of a decolonial turn from the ashes of the Third World movement. Beginning with a collection of examples of references to the Third World in popular media, and rooted in her experiences teaching histories of the Global South, her piece offers a powerful frame for a conversation

about what the Third World was and what its relevance might be for today that is accessible to a wide audience.

Following from here, the others in this forum highlight the power of the internationalism of the Third World project that insisted political struggles were shared across state borders. But they also recognize the real failures of Third World anti-colonial state policies that continued to subjugate Indigenous communities, women, and racialized minorities—even as those nation states entered so-called postcolonial regimes. A *decolonizing* of the *Third World project* would center Indigenous critiques that draw out the violent elisions and silences of the liberation promised by the state heroes of the Third World.[4] Alongside feminist and anti-racist critiques, this refusal of and resistance to the Third World project is vital for any lessons its histories might proffer.

At the same time, is it possible to imagine what *Third Worlding* contemporary efforts to decolonize would entail? Without romance or nostalgia, can a critical turn to the practices and affects of the Third World project as it was lived and felt in everyday practices, offer insight to the contemporary moment? Guided by these questions, the entries that follow propose Third Worlding as a twin project of learning and unlearning. *Towards Third Worlding* is a proposal to make familiar historical precedents and make strange contemporary assumptions around the building of solidarity and progressive visions of intersectional, anti-racist, decolonial struggle. It seeks out other ways of calling comrades into political practices by exploring the ways in which Third World subjects imagined and related to each other.

Exploring the potential for Third Worlding as a proposal of political orientation for the present requires reckoning with the centrality of the state in the radical political visions of the Third World project. As mentioned above, we locate the historical shortcomings of the Third World project in the violent elisions and subjugations of third world state policies even in the name of an internationalist,

anti-colonial politics. For example, in his entry to this forum, Edward Onaci < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/captive-new-afrikan-nation-solidarity-liberation-onaci/> brings us into the history of the Republic of New Afrika's (RNA) fertile experiment in building liberation through land and self-determination in the United States. The RNA here offer an interesting grounding for a Third Worldist project that is geographically situated in the heart of the so-called First World, where the conditions of liberation are equally and directly tied to a settler colonial history and ongoing present; and one that is internationalist by developing the tensions between a nationalist and non-nationalist politics. Onaci explores the ways in which New Afrikans articulated belonging in a radical new nation that acknowledged Indigenous claims to the land. Onaci identifies that this forging of new frameworks for just belonging "could not use myths about a perfect Black-Indigenous friendship to help justify their claims to the five state territory." In so doing, his entry gives us an example of Third Worlding work outside the statist discourses of the Third World project popularized by its iconic leaders. The implications of Black freedom and Native liberation in settler and slave society are bound up with rich meaning for solidarity through contradiction.

In different ways, Maia Ramnath and Dahlia El Zein's entries also explore felt textures of political belonging related to but at a remove from the discourse of iconic artists and politicians like the Indian poet Ali Sardar Jafri and Egyptian president Gamal Abd al-Nasser. For Ramnath, this takes the form of a creative license with Jafri's poetry < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/reawakening-ali-sardar-jafri-asia-jaag-utha-ramnath/> as an invitation to engage the poet's legacy from the perspective of today's environmental catastrophe. Engaging Jafri as a contemporary, Ramnath attempts to write back to to Jafri in a verse grounded in a contemporary context. In her entry, the speculative work of writing for and with a decolonized and decolonizing South Asia serves as one of many points of an imagined map whose contradictory territory may supply today our decolonial imaginations in the face of ecological

crisis, of the horizon of non-state polities that revitalize the call for self-determination of Indigenous and other subjugated peoples.

For her part and counter to what has been popular understanding of Nasser's legacy, Dahlia El Zein centers the 1967 Naksa ("defeat") as a productive event < https://csalateral.org/forum/towards-third-worlding/anti-colonial-defeat-1967-naksa-consequences-el-zein/> and set of relations central to rereading the affective afterlives of defeat in Egypt as heart of the Arabic-speaking world, and reverberating beyond. In so doing, she takes the decline of pan-Arabism as a starting point of where we might pick up Third Worlding today.

Together, these entries invite a creative exploration of orientation both towards the Third World as a historical project and to the political present. Central to each is a proposal of learning—unearthing aspects of specific political organizing and movement building—as well as unlearning—invitations to revisit assumptions about both specific historical moments as well as the political present.

Learning and Unlearning

We offer this two-fold invitation to fellow teachers, organizers, and students to deepen collective imagining. How to understand and remember the Third World project as a collective horizon of freedom and liberation dreamed and enacted by ordinary people in their daily lives and in their unique historical conditions (beyond the biographies of popular national leaders and the conventions they hosted)? In trying to center the everyday, lived, affective, and contradictory can we shake the hold of claims to historical truth centered on the flawed projects of post- and anti-colonial nation-states? Without these overdetermined nodes dominating flows of people and ideas in the Third World network, how else can we understand how ordinary organizers felt, reached, and sustained each other across contexts and locales?

We consider pursuing answers to these questions as a part of the practice of unlearning imperialism about which the art historian Ariella Aïsha Azoulay has recently written at length. In explaining how *unlearning* could be not about resisting tomorrow but resisting yesterday, she writes,

Unlearning is a way of disengaging from political initiatives, concepts, or modes of thinking, including critical theory, that are devised and promoted as progressive and unprecedented. Instead, it insists that *finding precedents—or at least assuming that precedents could be found*—for resistance to racial and colonial crimes is not the novel work of academic discovery.[5]

Knowing about the leaders of the Third World and indeed of other anti-colonial, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist movements is important. For many, uncovering their connections with each other can be exciting discoveries. However, underneath the shadow of the great initiatives and leaders of the Third World lies the less documented archives of collective and popular struggles led by ordinary people who sought their own liberation.

We seek to better understand the everyday material and affective exchanges that sustained the political project marking the anti-colonial movements and workers' struggles between the end of World War II and the height of the Cold War, called "the Third World." We are concerned with the ways in which the prominent, in some cases notorious, leaders of the national anti-colonial movements have come to stand in for an entire fabric of social imagination that connected peasants, workers, students, mothers, fighters, teachers, and more in those turbulent, vital decades. In turning to and reading the past, we also mean to turn to an immaterial —hardly less significant, but less tangible—web of imagination, relationality, affect, and memory of freedom. How to excavate precisely this sticky material of the Third World? And then, how to learn from their successes and failures, orientations and imaginings, practiced and aspirated intercommunality?

To Third World one's research, movement building, writing, listening, bearing witness is not to resurrect the Third World project, its heroes, its successes, or its failures. It is rather to remember that there were bridges across impasses and to inquire after how they were imagined, and crossed. In this way, *Third Worlding* may be one mode by which to retrieve, as Azoulay writes, "other modalities of sharing the world and the many refusals inherent in people's public performances, diverse claims, and repressed aspirations."[6] It is, in sum, a practice of *world-making* or *worlding*.

If the first part of third worlding is a practice of learning, the second component of this invitation is *a project of unlearning*. We ask, what of our contemporary modes of connecting struggles need to be made strange and reexamined in order for sustained forms of collaborative struggle to emerge, grow, develop, and transform? *The point is to get better at imagining our belonging to each other's freedom dreams and liberation struggles*.

This twin invitation makes up a search for alternative logics of struggle—distant from contemporary, progressive performances of solidarity and allyship. It is (we hope) a renewing and rethinking of internationalism and solidarity via the ways in which it appears or comes into being.

In convening a conversation around the possibility of *Third Worlding* our internationalist orientations to contemporary struggles, and of acting upon connections between them, our project additionally draws from recent scholarship addressing the practices of *worldmaking*. We draw on recent political excavations of the anti-colonial nationalism of Black, Indigenous, and Third World histories of anti-imperial *worldmaking* as foundational to a possible practice of Third Worlding.[7] We also draw on the work of BIPOC activists and movement makers as they reflect on the impasses faced in the past years of mobilizing during the pandemic and the ways in which they are building new practices and forms of knowledge around autonomy, mutual aid, collective action, and

sovereignty.[8] We turn to this body of work to lay out the potential of Third Worlding as an active othering of the political present and as a practice of excavating meaningful frameworks for shared struggle.

What Third Worlding is Not

In a foundational essay, postcolonial scholar Gayatri Spivak writes of how the British imperial archive constructs a place it calls "the Third World" and populates it with objects of representation it refers to as Third World women and men.[9] Her point in doing so is not to restate the truism that history is written by the victors but to examine the ways in which "Europe consolidated itself as sovereign subject by defining its colonies as others."[10] In other words, how this archival work amounted to a practice of worlding—a narrative of Britain in itself and in the world—on its own and in relation to its others. *Third Worlding* as we intend it here is not the constructing of colonial others (the kind of worlding that empire still enacts successfully). Rather, it is a practice of orienting towards radical histories that refuses the impetus to do so as rupture, break, or lineage. Beyond continuity, legacy, or break, *Third Worlding* promises a strategy of summoning anti-colonial and anti-capitalist struggle.

The forum is a small collection of diverse claims and repressed aspirations as cultures of freedom-making that can be understood together as a practice of worlding—or, a practice of ordering the world and imagining futures for it. This radical archive of shorthands, sketches for action, invitations to join, belong, rise up, provide a reservoir of rich meanings attached to the concept of solidarity. In this we lean on political theorist Adom Getachew's work as it attends to Black nationalism in the thought of individuals like Nnamdi Azikiwe, W. E. B. Du Bois, and George Padmore. Her work encourages us to see the anticolonial self-determination of these thinkers not solely in terms of nation building but as "anticipat[ing] and reconfigur[ing]" our contemporary political and economic

crises.[11] As Getachew argues, this body of Black anticolonial thought presents a wide range of rejections and inversions of, and imaginations beyond, the borders carved by the imperial order. Like her, we hope a *Third Worlding* of research and practice might "attend to the specificity of postcolonial sovereignty . . . and recent[er] the enduring legacies of European imperialism in our present."[12] The material we turn to as worlding practices offer a compelling way of thinking of what we refer to as *non-nationalist internationalism*—or internationalist alliances not dependent on the imperial frameworks of the nation-state and the dominations of sovereign rule and (post)colonial state power imposed on freedom movements.

Third Worlding as a Verb

In her recent book *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging,* the political scientist Jodi Dean draws attention to the pitfalls of an identity-based project of solidarity. We are moved by her critique of political modes in the US, where discussions of proper modes of "allyship" have degenerated into "mini lifestyle manuals," helping those with privilege to "feel engaged . . . without any organized political struggle at all."[13] Building from her critique, we further explore relations of comradery called into being through a shared understanding of the work of building liberation. What does that work look like in practice today? What references do we have for it? *This is a question that attends to the practice of imagining and hailing each other into struggle as we endeavor to become more than ourselves in relation to others.* Moreover, we wonder if it is not also necessary to explore how practices of mutuality and interconnection, in addition to relationality and responsibility, are built in struggle.

In this forum we *propose Third Worlding as a search for alternative logics of struggle.* This search, at its heart, is a rethinking of internationalism and solidarity via the ways in which it appears or comes into being. The four entries of this

forum consider the lessons that histories of transnational formations of power built from the bottom up might offer the imagining and building of shared struggle today. They are collected under the frame of rethinking and relinking (learning and unlearning) Third World histories in order to renew their conditions of possibility today. That is, we propose "Third World*ing*" our sense of internationalism today—as a *verb*—as an active consideration of past struggles, cultural frameworks, leaders, and affective modes of relation in the service of building political alliance today and imagining its contours tomorrow.

The entries of the forum use Third Worlding as a verb by thinking about it as a practice of calling, hailing, or otherwise interpellating a collective subject, shared on different geographic scales and historical moments and passages. Onaci writes about the figures beckoning members to the New Afrikan nation to join the struggle for independence. El Zein discusses the way in which the defeat of the Naksa called a range of political actors into different understandings of the future, a departure from the solidarity politics of the anti-colonial project of the Third World. This question of hailing the subject is most clear perhaps in Ramnath's engagement with Ali Jafri's poem, in his question, 'Where are you, o sons of Asia?' and her retort "Is it dawn or dusk?/ Doesn't matter, we are on the move together." Ramnath especially embodies Azoulay's practice of unlearning as a return to the past that is not a sterile exercise of visiting primary sources, but of engaging "potential companions"[14] Together, the entries in the forum explore the tones and modes of interpellation. Taking Dean's question—"how do we imagine political work? . . . and how are the relations among those fighting on the same side imagined?"[15]—we hope the forum thus offers different avenues to explore how to stand with and hail others and the political relations we use to do so.

Third Worlding Now

Cascading crises mark the contradictions of today's prevailing order. In the past decade, authoritarian populism has become the shared ideology of ordering the world from on high. Strongman politicians espouse hateful policies and revanchist programs that routinely couple with reactionary, grassroots, and networked cultural mobilizations of misogyny, anti-Blackness, xenophobia, Islamophobia, anti-Semitism, and a virulent nativism that unearths and renews the eliminationism inherent to liberalism on a world scale. At the same time, human- and colonial-capitalist-driven climate change makes clear that the devastating planetary realities of our unfolding present and impending future will require bold ways to imagine our relations of dependency on each other. In every domain of social, political, and cultural life, *the question is still internationalism or barbarism*. But stating as much is increasingly less a telling declaration of position and more an invitation to ask: what kind of internationalism?

The moral bankruptcy of a liberal worldview that rushes to open borders to displaced Ukrainians while shuttering them to Palestinians, Central Americans, Syrians, Ethiopians, and Afghanis displays the sheer nakedness of its failures. The obvious hypocrisy of its assumptions cannot hold even the most basic positions. And while duplicity dominates state responses to international crisis in Sudan, Tigray, Libya, Türkiye, we are struck by the notable international and internationalist responses to the torture and murder of individual protesters, journalists, and organizers by illegitimate and autocratic settler states. We note the speed with which the names Tortuguita and Shireen Abu Akleh became household references and we mark the poignant ways in which their funerals and vigils in commemoration trace clear international vectors.

This forum arrives at a moment of suspension, pregnant with peril as well as possibilities.

It responds to the felt need to build upon engaged, intersectional analysis and concerted action by critically assessing and strategically reanimating non-state internationalisms from below to counter a range of internationalisms from above. We name the rich and plural cultural experiences of worldmaking that historically constituted the Third World project as an ongoing hypothesis for thinking through questions of solidarity amidst the devastating tail spin of ecological, authoritarian, and imperial crises everywhere in the world today. The ambition of thinking in this moment—the *project of renewing global solidarity and making worlds otherwise*—requires us to trace an inherited genealogy of freedom struggles and freedom dreams that deserve narrative reanimation, or what Eduardo Galeano refers to as "the memory of fire."[16]

We release these pieces with a sense of urgency that has only deepened since the summer of 2020 when we issued the open call. In the years since, as popular authoritarianism and new forms of grassroots care and rebellion have emerged and accelerated, the editors and authors of this forum have looked to the past in search of frameworks, textures, rhythms to help assemble and connect liberatory tendencies within contemporary resistance movements across discrete lands and histories. The forum that follows is a collection of pieces exploring possible lessons in the ways in which communities imagined change, the future, and solidarity across borders and contexts in years past. Third World internationalism appeared in resistance to the very kinds of manifestations of colonial power we see entrenched today, e.g., ongoing war, policing, and authoritarianism; resource extraction, dispossession, displacement, and land grabbing; and the vulnerabilities to premature death amidst catastrophe.

Recognizing the unevenness with which right populism, racism, and resource extraction and allocation affected the members of the historical "Third World project" and tracing their rebellious energies is part of our own inherited task in understanding of how the unevenness and asymmetries of colonial racial capitalism (in authoritarian regimes, climate catastrophe, white supremacy) is

lived today. The Third World project provided a framework beyond, and a way to connect through, that unevenness. Third Worlding can help us identify the persistence of colonial, racial, and patriarchal forms of domination today, and how their structuring effects, evolving and taking new forms, are part of a historical genealogy of the present that includes memories, cultures, and expressions of resistance.

Third Worlding also reminds us that, just as was the case with the Third World project historically, there is no one, universally shareable analytic, ideology, political strategy that can positively build worlds in opposition to ongoing local and global colonial orderings. In this regard, we follow the wisdom of the unity possible in grounded particularities that the Zapatistas encapsulate in their expression, "one no, many yeses." Dene scholar Glen Couthard details how the histories and traditions of collective action, theory, and resistance-making in Third World Marxism and Indigenous Fourth World liberation struggles can and should be thought of in relation to one another.[17] Though they trace distinct intellectual and historical conditions, their political resonances and inspirations are meaningful. In writing about Indigenous internationalism, Nishnaabeg writer Leanne Betasamosake Simpson argues that land-based Indigenous sovereignty movements, however grounded in specific histories and territories, have always been shaped by global developments of both colonial capitalism and its many resistances. Moveover, she states, "with our complex ways of relating to the plant nations, animal nations, and the spiritual realm, our existence has always been inherently international regardless of how rooted in place we are."[18]

The "Third World" therefore is not a geographic place, but rooted in places where ongoing colonial racial capitalism draws upon and deepens the geographic and social patterns (relational, concrete, abstract) of colonial racial capitalism in its reordering of the world. In that regard, the lived places, cultures, and histories of peoples historically subjugated by colonial racial capitalism continue today to be the geographic spaces of violent extraction, appropriation, and devastation of

environments; the social locations where the greatest exploitation, immiseration, and exposure to vulnerability exists; and also the places of great resistance with which we aim to connect and advance our own struggles in thoughtful articulation. Today's struggles for land and water defense as well as, and part of, longstanding projects for decolonization, land back, and sovereignty; police, prison, and border abolition; resistance to feminicide and the "re-existence" of feminist and queer life, and anticapitalism criss-cross these histories, spaces and social locations. We read the forum that follows as an invitation to *world* our struggles and renew the frames of our internationalist imaginations. We hope it calls you and are eager to hear what it elicits in response.

Notes

1. Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: New Press, 2007), xv. ↩
2. Our open call joins recent work in asking, "Is the state the only way to hold political community in the Third World?" See Elleni Centime Zeleke and Arash Davari, "Introduction: Third World Historical: Rethinking Revolution from Ethiopia to Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (2022): 422–429. See also Adom Getachew's *World Making after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019) and Manu Karuka's *Empire's Tracks: Indigenous Nations, Chinese Workers, and the Transcontinental Railroad* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2019) for recent Third World internationalist scholarship. ↩
3. Alaa' Abd Al Fattah, *You Have Not yet Been Defeated: Selected Works 2011–2021* (Seven Stories Press, 2022). ↩
4. George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). ↩
5. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism* (New York: Verso, 2019), 17. ↩
6. Azoulay, *Potential History*, 16. ↩
7. See Alyosha Goldstein and Simon Ventura Trujillo, eds., *For Antifascist Futures: Against the Violence of Imperial Crisis* (Brooklyn: Common Notions, 2022). ↩
8. See for example *Indigenous Action Podcast*, "Indigenous Mutual Aid: One Year of Pandemic Response and Organizing," April 28, 2021,

https://www.indigenousmutualaid.org/indigenous-action-podcast-ep-7-indigenous-mutual-aid-one-year-of-pandemic-response-organizing/ < https://www.indigenousmutualaid.org/indigenous-action-podcast-ep-7-indigenous-mutual-aid-one-year-of-pandemic-response-organizing/> ; and *Millenials are Killing Capitalism,* "400+1 On the Struggle for Orisha Land and the Case for a Black Vanguard," March 7, 2021, https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/website/size/5/?search=400%2B1 < https://millennialsarekillingcapitalism.libsyn.com/website/size/5/?search=400%2B1> . ↩

9. She writes that this amounts to "the construction of a fiction whose task was to produce a whole collection of 'effects of the real,' and that the 'misreading' of this 'fiction' produced the proper name 'India.'" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24, no. 3 (1985): 249. ↩

10. Spivak, "Rani of Sirmur," 247. ↩

11. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2019), 3. ↩

12. Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire*, 9. ↩

13. Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019), 17. ↩

14. Azoulay, *Potential History,* 16. ↩

15. Jodi Dean, *Comrade: An Essay on Political Belonging* (New York: Verso, 2019), 8. ↩

16. Eduardo Galeano, *The Memory of Fire Trilogy (Genesis, Faces and Masks, and Century of the Wind)*, trans. Cedric Belfrage (New York: Open Road Media, 1988). The epigraph reads: "I believe in memory not as a place of arrival, but as a point of departure—a catapult throwing you into present times, allowing you to imagine the future instead of accepting it. It would be absolutely impossible for me to have any connection with history if history were just a collection of dead people, dead names, dead facts. That's why I wrote *Memory of Fire* in the present tense, trying to keep alive everything that happened and allow it to happen again, as soon as the reader reads it." ↩

17. Glen Couthard, "Once Were Maoists: Third World Currents in Fourth World Anti-Colonialism, Vancouver, 1967–1975," *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies* (London: Routledge, 2020). See also Glen Sean Coulthard's introduction to *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, by George Manuel and Michael Posluns (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota, 2018). ↩

18. Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom Through Radical Resistance* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 56. ↩

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Decolonization and the Third World

by Jessica Namakkal | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT This essay asks why the Third World has become a symbol of poverty and failed infrastructure while the political imperative towards decolonization has gained popularity. By examining histories of decolonization in mid-twentieth century and the subsequent establishment of postcolonial nation-states that often ignored, suppressed, or actively participated in settler colonial occupations both globally and internally, I argue that there needs to be a widespread reckoning with what constitutes anti-colonial liberation.

KEYWORDS Fourth World, Third World, anti-colonial, decolonial, settler colonialism

The Third World project and decolonization are two interconnected ideas with deeply intertwined histories—decolonization was, in many instances, a key demand of the Third World project—yet the post-1970s history of these movements have diverged in many ways. In contemporary cultural discourse, the Third World is treated as a place (the space of the former colony) problematically fixed in time (the time of the backwards, pre-colonial past), while decolonization has gained traction as a verb that can be applied to virtually anything, from university curricula, to the IMF < https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/11/26/it-is-time-to-decolonise-the-world-bank-and-the-imf> , to museums < https://decolonizethisplace.org/bk-musuem> , to settler occupied land.[1] While some of these invocations of decolonization are marketing ploys meant to sell exorbitantly priced skin care products, decolonization as a movement that centers the repatriation of

indigenous land and a rethinking of the supposed end of colonial history has become the horizon of anti-colonial politics. This runs contrary to the fate of the Third World, which, as a noun, has become a signal of the failure of the anti-colonial politics of the past. Towards third worlding and building out solidarity between contemporary movements struggling with how to use anti-colonial history towards liberatory futures, this essay asks: how did decolonization and the Third World come to hold such different meanings and possibilities, and what would it mean to reimagine the Third World as a space of ongoing decolonization? One potential answer that I explore here is that many Third World nation-states, after achieving independence, compromised the Third World project's ideal of global decolonization by accepting forms of settler colonialism and internal colonialism as distinct and separate from what became known "alien" or "foreign" rule, dividing already ruptured populations into even smaller factions.

What Happened to the Third World?

Despite the rich and complex histories of political movements that "invented" the Third World, the term has come to signal a geographically specific constellation of poverty, corruption, and backwards-ness associated with the former colonial and decolonizing world.[2] The denigration of the term has built up over decades in U.S. popular culture and politics. Like clockwork, every time a crisis occurs in the United States that lays bare the deeply weak and flawed infrastructure of the state, people flock to media outlets to declare that this moment is so horrific precisely because it makes the US look like "a third world country." In February 2021, when severe winter weather knocked out power and cut off clean water supplies throughout Texas and neighboring states, leaving millions of people without heat or water, Twitter ballooned with comments comparing the US to a generic third world country. Just weeks prior to this, when white supremacists stormed the US Capitol on January 6, 2021, many rushed to make an argument that what had occurred was a coup, which had transformed the United States

into, you guessed it, a third world country. Everyone from CNN anchors to then President-elect Joe Biden made some sort of comment about how out of place, and third-worldish, the targeted violence seemed.[3]

While most media-savvy readers will understand the constant invocation of the third world to describe weakened infrastructure as hyperbole, it points to a truth that the idea of the Third World as an internationalist project of transnational solidarity and liberation is not widely understood or appreciated in US popular cultures and discourse. Take for example an essay that ran on NPR on January 8, 2021, two days after the Capitol riots, titled "Memo to the People of Earth: 'Third World' is an Offensive Term!" < https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term> [4] The short piece engages with various people from the Third World who work for development NGOs, or just happen to come from these countries, quoting their dislike of the term as evidence of a universal disavowal of "Third World." They locate their dislike of the term "Third World" as stemming from a sense of being ranked lower than the First World (without giving much thought to the position of the former Soviet-bloc Second World). This disdain is premised on the idea that Third World countries are always aspiring to be First World countries, a sort of high stakes popularity contest that obscures the anti-imperial, anti-colonial, and anti-capitalist politics that undergirded the formation of the Third World, and completely loses sight of the great importance of the Second World. Utilized in this way, the term is both depoliticized and dehistoricized, emptied of the radical politics and history that propelled the Third World as a liberatory project into existence.

While the Third World has been almost entirely drained of its original meaning and intention, the idea of decolonization has rapidly gained in popularity. I have been teaching courses on decolonization, as well as Global Studies courses that center Third World history, at Duke University for over a decade. In my experience, while most students have consistently entered the classroom with a distaste for the

idea of the Third World, citing many of the reasons mentioned above related to rankings and poverty, they have become increasingly excited about and interested in decolonization. While I have been quite heartened by the growing interest in decolonization, I find it interesting that students are so quick to dismiss the importance of the Third World as a continuing project while simultaneously embracing the urgent contemporary need for decolonization rooted in anti-imperialist and abolitionist principles.

History (as both an academic discipline and a web of popular discourse) has tended to treat decolonization as a firm rupture between the colonial world and the postcolonial world, a distinction that historians are now starting to question and reject, lagging behind people on the ground who have long noted that there is not much "post" in the postcolonial world.[5] Likewise, the Third World project is often constructed as a linear narrative consisting of "a birth, a flourishing, and then a death . . . bookended by the 1950s and the 1970s."[6] When decolonization is treated as a temporal break with the imperial world, all the problems of the postcolonial world, those also associated with the supposed decay of the Third World, become proof that the colonies were not prepared for self-rule, that European empires were correct in their assessments that the colonized needed the tutelage and structure so kindly given by the imperial forces. The belief that European empires, especially Britain and France, provided a net good in the world has in fact recently come back into fashion.[7] It is easy to blame the violence of empire on past actors, absolving those living in the present from taking responsibility for the global inequalities rooted in empire. Violence in the "postcolonial" world is thus supposedly rooted in, for example, terrorist barbarism, not in the actions of anti-colonial actors fighting for liberation from settler colonial occupation, as we see in the decades-long violence in Palestine.

Importantly, states that emerged from the ashes of anti-colonial struggles—the building blocks of the Third World—have often kept colonial institutions in place, from legal codes to systems of education, replacing the colonial ruler with the

supposedly postcolonial nationalist state. This leads us to ask, what makes a nation-state postcolonial? Is it right to theorize India or Israel as postcolonial states when they actively participate in settler colonial projects?[8] Despite arguments by historians of the Third World that the Third World was a project not limited by national borders or territories, that is how it tends to be remembered and treated: not only as a geographic space "left behind" by colonial progress, but a space that is undesirable and that should be relegated to the past. The transition within international relations and related fields to transform the Third World into a space in need of international development, and thus to be referred to as "developing nations," was a way of taking autonomy away from the Third World and giving it back to the colonizers who would now be responsible for bringing modernity to those who lacked it.[9] It is not surprising that students today are more familiar with the Third World as a *place* of decay rather than a *project* of liberation.

Decolonization, Settler Colonialism, and the Making of Worlds

Like all projects, the Third World project has had successes and failures, especially as former colonies achieved independence throughout the twentieth century and entered the international stage as sovereign nation-states. As former colonies were brought into the world system, most often under conditions set by the global world powers and regulated through the United Nations, a deep gulf developed between the newly independent nation-states and indigenous nations and populations around the world who continued (and continue) to suffer under the ongoing system of settler colonialism, from Turtle Island to Aotearoa to Palestine, and everywhere in-between. The idea that global colonialism ended with the physical departure of imperial states from colonies stemmed from a United Nations Resolution adopted on December 16, 1952. Resolution 637, "The

Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination," stipulated that nations located *within* UN member states may not seek or obtain independence through self-determination.[10] This clause became known as the "blue water rule" or "salt-water thesis," because the United Nations only considered nations ruled by powers *across water* as colonial spaces worthy of the right to self-determination. Any nations that lay on territories within the new states were thus not officially colonized, and were subject to the governance of whomever had control over the territory they lay within.

As Adom Getachew wrote in her book *Worldmaking After Empire*, the salt-water thesis was the moment when "alien rule was differentiated from settler colonial experiences through the requirement of geographic distance."[11] The inability (which was often an outright unwillingness) of postcolonial elites and state makers to consider anything other than "overseas alien" rule as imperial has not only erased the ongoing destruction wrought by settler colonialism but has also given postcolonial states a free pass to ignore what many call internal colonialism, from the ongoing military occupation of Kashmir by the Indian government to the continued struggle by the EZLN in Chiapas against the Mexican state. Although the United Nations eventually adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) in 2007, it had earlier been blocked in 2006 after twenty-two years of negotiation. The stall was initiated by a "Namibian-led block of thirty African countries plus Western countries such as Australia, Canada, and New Zealand."[12] All countries raised concerns over definitional issues regarding who constitutes an "Indigenous" people, the impact of the UNDRIP on state constitutions, and official state policies regarding "land claims" and ownership of "natural resources."[13]

At the historic moments of decolonization in Africa and Asia in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, many of the rising Third World nation-states chose to ignore calls for self-determination in settler colonial states *and within* their own states, choosing instead to negotiate with the United States, Canadian, Australian, and New

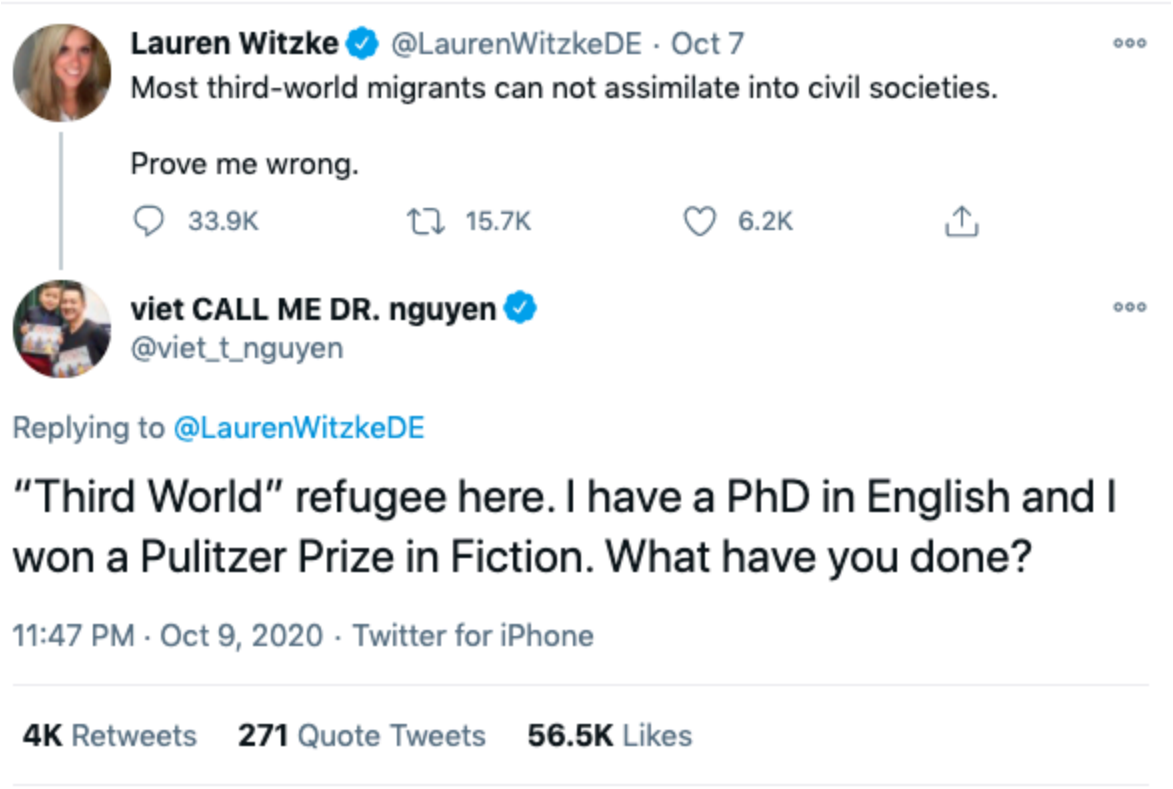
Zealand governments, ignoring the status of these states as settler colonial states, rather than see the project of the Third World as one for global decolonization. When emerging states did attempt to address internal struggles for liberation, they were quickly shut down, often by outside agencies located in the United States, as was clear in Indonesia and throughout Latin America.[14] The Third World as a liberatory project may be poorly understood, but it has been widely recognized as a legitimate political project. In contrast, while Indigenous activists around the world did actively call for decolonization of their territories during what is thought of as the high-period of decolonization (1950s–1970s), often drawing on and collaborating with Third World independence movements, this is not generally included in histories of the Third World.[15]

That settler states do not recognize themselves as colonial powers is part of the structure of settler colonialism.[16] This is not only a problem for Indigenous peoples in the First World. In a recent lecture, Naga Anthropologist Dolly Kikkon spoke of her experience growing up in Northeast India, an area the postcolonial Indian state officially labeled a "disturbed area," thus making the people within these territorial boundaries subject to military occupation and increased police surveillance.[17] Kikkon describes how the Indian state has profiled people in the Northeast as "suspicious, primitive, barbarians." The Third World as a world-making project may have been internationalist in scope, but it was also limited in that it focused primarily on organizing across colonies and former colonies that were making claims for statehood, failing to consider the continuation of settler colonialism in large parts of the world.

Towards New Worlds

What does decolonization mean on Turtle Island today, especially for people who are not Indigenous and are not ancestors of enslaved African peoples? A particularly thorny problem emerges when immigrants from the Third World rush

to defend their place of origin and their success as migrants *without* an acknowledgement of the role they play in the continuing settler colonial project. For example, during the long run-up to the 2020 elections, the (unsuccessful) Republican nominee for the United States Senate from Delaware, Lauren Witzke, tweeted "Most third-world migrants cannot assimilate into civil societies. Prove me wrong."[18] Witzke's xenophobic tweet provoked a massive response as people who identify as "third-world migrants" rushed to prove just how accomplished, and assumedly assimilated, they are. Scholars, medical doctors, artists, politicians, business leaders, and really anyone with some sort of academic degree ratioed Witzke's original tweet into oblivion by sharing an avalanche of impressive credentials. These tweets proved that "third-world migrants" have in fact been very successful in the West, earning top degrees, becoming CEOs of major corporations, and carving out space to become members of the bourgeois elite. Novelist, academic, and Vietnamese refugee Viet Thanh Nguyen responded to Witzke with "'Third World' refugee here. I have a PhD in English and I won a Pulitzer Prize in Fiction. What have you done?"[19]



Nguyen's defense of the third world migrant clearly struck a chord with people: his tweet received far more support than Witzke's original dog whistle ever garnered. Nestled within the threads were a few voices of dissent that took Nguyen and others to task for promoting the neoliberal individualism that is fully expected from "third-world migrants" in North America and most European countries. It also highlighted how migrants from certain parts of the Third World, primarily East/Southeast and South Asia have benefitted from the idea of the model minority but imbuing certain migrants with the innate ability for upward economic mobility. While Nguyen had placed Third World in quotation marks, perhaps noting his disapproval of the way that Witzke used the term, the effect of thousands of people re-tweeting his tweet with their own hyper-successful credentials meant to show the power of "third-world migrants" boosted the idea that the Third World migrant is, in fact, assimilable into the First World. This assimilation comes at the expense of those most deeply affected by the continuation of settler colonialism. The writer and activist Harsha Walia has

spoken and written extensively about the challenges and necessities of bringing together migrant justice with Indigenous sovereignty movements. She notes that this is often very uneven and traumatic terrain: while it may be true that many migrants and Indigenous people on Turtle Island have experienced oppression under colonialism, not all migrants had the same experience of being colonized, and many now benefit from property ownership made possible by land dispossession from Indigenous peoples.[20] While the Third World often fought for decolonization *across* borders, the decolonization that we need now would be for the abolition of borders. If we are to take our cues not from the anti-colonial nationalist struggles of the Third World, but instead from the histories of struggle that dreamed of another world all together, we might see the conversation begin to shift. I end here with one final example: in 1974, Secwepemc activist and thinker George Manuel published his manifesto *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality.* While he drew on his experiences with Third World organizing, he notes they were different projects. The Fourth World, in his formulation, could not be separate from other worlds because they were already too intertwined. He wrote "The Fourth World is no less open to others than it is to us."[21] Speaking in the present, Walia emphasizes the need for interdependence because "there is no liberation in isolation." Decolonization today means understanding that decolonization has never been a completed event, that postcolonial nation-states are still living in a time and space of colonialism, and that all states have the power to dispossess. The Third World project is ongoing, and so is decolonization. The two projects need to come together to be effective.

Notes

1. For some important discussions on what decolonization means in the present moment, see Gurminder K. Bhambra, Kerem Nisancioglu, and Dalia Gebrial, eds., *Decolonising the University* (London: Pluto, 2018); Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, "Decolonization is not a Metaphor," *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1, no. 1 (2012): 1–40; Andrew Curley, Pallavi Gupta, Lara Lookabaugh, Christopher Neubert, and Sara Smith, "Decolonisation is a Political Project: Overcoming Impasse between Indigenous Sovereignty and Abolition," *Antipode: A Radical Journal of Geography* (2022): 1–20. I'm

not going to link to sites promising to decolonize your beauty standards, but believe me, those sites are everywhere. ↩

2. For a recent anthology on histories of the Third World, see Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash, eds., *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South* (Bloomsbury, 2022). ↩

3. Shariana Ferrer-Núñez, Melody Fonseca, and Fernando Tormos-Aponte, "Why It's So Misleading to Call the Capitol Violence 'Third World,'" *Washington Post,* January 16, 2021, https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/16/why-its-so-misleading-call-capitol-violence-third-world/ < https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/01/16/why-its-so-misleading-call-capitol-violence-third-world/> . ↩

4. Marc Silver, "Memo To People Of Earth: 'Third World' Is An Offensive Term!," *Goats and Soda*, NPR, January 8, 2021, https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term < https://www.npr.org/sections/goatsandsoda/2021/01/08/954820328/memo-to-people-of-earth-third-world-is-an-offensive-term> . ↩

5. For example, Arundhati Roy, "How to Think about Empire," *Boston Review*, January 3, 2019, http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism < http://bostonreview.net/literature-culture-global-justice/arundhati-roy-avni-sejpal-challenging-%E2%80%9Cpost-%E2%80%9D-postcolonialism> . The problematic temporal distinction between colonial and postcolonial is an issue I take up in my book *Unsettling Utopia: The Making and Unmaking of French India* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2021). ↩

6. Srirupa Roy, "The Death of the Third World: Curative Democracy and World-Making in Late 1970s India," in *Inventing the Third World: In Search of Freedom for the Postwar Global South*, ed. Jeremy Adelman and Gyan Prakash (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022): 239–260. ↩

7. In 2005, a law known as the law of 23 February 2005, was proposed that would have made it mandatory for French schools to recognize "the positive role of the French presence overseas, especially in North Africa." See Hervé Tchumkam, et al. "Banlieues." *Postcolonial Realms of Memory: Sites and Symbols in Modern France*, Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020, pp. 101–8. The 2016 Brexit vote in Britain unleashed a torrent of imperial nostalgia that has not subsided. Catherine Hall, "The Racist Ideas of Slave Owners are Still with Us Today," the *Guardian,* September 26, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/26/racist-ideas-slavery-slave-owners-hate-crime-brexit-vote < https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/sep/26/racist-ideas-slavery-slave-owners-hate-crime-brexit-vote> . ↩

8. Esmat Elhalaby, "A Dying Postcolonialism," *Abusable Past*, September 26, 2023, https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/a-dying-postcolonialism <

https://www.radicalhistoryreview.org/abusablepast/a-dying-postcolonialism/> .

9. Arturo Escobar, *Encountering Development: The Making and Unmaking of the Third World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2012).

10. UN General Assembly, Resolution 637, The Right of Peoples and Nations to Self-Determination, A/RES/637 (December 16, 1952), accessed May 3, 2021, https://www.refworld.org/docid/3b00f0791c.html.

11. Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking After Empire: The Rise and Fall of Self-Determination* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press), 84–87.

12. Glen Sean Coulthard, "Introduction: A Fourth World Resurgent," introduction to *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, by George Manuel and Michael Posluns (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), xxix.

13. Coulthard, introduction, xxixx.

14. Vincent Bivens, *The Jakarta Method: Washington's Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2022).

15. On the development of movements for decolonization with the American Indian Movement, see Daniel M. Cobb, Sarah Barger, and Lily Skopp "A Sickness which Has Grown to Epidemic Proportions": American Indian Anti- and Decolonial Thought during the Long 1960s" *Comparative American Studies* 17, no. 2(2020): 199–223.

16. Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 387–409.

17. Many areas of Northeast India have fallen under the category of "disturbed area" since the 1970s. Kashmir has had the same designation since 1990. Dolly Kikkon, "Are You Still Studying? Anthropology, Decolonization, and Practice," Center for India and South Asia Speaker Series, UCLA, December 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vRD4yQu2Heo.

18. Lauren Wtizke, Twitter, October 7, 2020, 11:43am. https://twitter.com/LaurenWitzkeDE/status/1313867438770057218.

19. Viet Thanh Ngyuen, Twitter, October 9, 2020, 11:47pm, https://twitter.com/viet_t_nguyen/status/1314774482754494469 < https://twitter.com/viet_t_nguyen/status/1314774482754494469> .

20. Interview with Harsha Walia, "Prefiguring Border Justice," *Critical Ethnic Studies* 6, no. 1 (2020), https://manifold.umn.edu/read/prefiguring-border-justice-interview-with-harsha-walia/section/96855cdc-5a01-45cd-9f1f-fc54b4ea6289 < https://manifold.umn.edu/read/prefiguring-border-justice-interview-with-harsha-walia/section/96855cdc-5a01-45cd-9f1f-fc54b4ea6289> .

21. George Manuel and Michael Posluns, *The Fourth World: An Indian Reality*, 1974 (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), 261.

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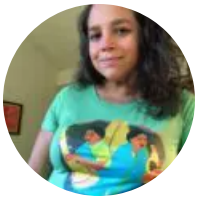

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The Captive New Afrikan Nation, the Politics of Solidarity, and the Ongoing Struggle for Liberation

by Edward Onaci | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT In 1968, the world was changing. New nation-states were forming as former colonies revised relationships between Africa, Asia, and the "West." Some fought hard for their liberation, and some were still fighting. From Vietnam to Zimbabwe, bloody struggles against racist settlers and western capital clarified the tenacity of white supremacy and imperialism. Other nations were "peacefully" exchanging white political leadership for parties and personalities rooted in local soil. All excited the US Black left who welcomed the changes as the ideal condition for Black liberation. Among them were activists who, beginning in March 1968, decided to pursue the creation of an independent Black nation-state that would occupy land in the Deep South. Considering Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia as the rightful territory of their Republic of New Afrika, those who championed independence sought to replicate the apparent successes of Tanzania and other newly formed states, while contributing to the complete overthrow of western hegemony. This contribution explores the theory of the New Afrikan struggle for land and independence. It considers how New Afrikans negotiated their African ancestry and colonized status with their distinctly North American position within geopolitics. In asserting their right to self-determination, New Afrikans complicated the meanings of captivity and Third World solidarity in ways unique to the Black Power era. Even as they built on their predecessors from the African Blood Brotherhood, UNIA, and even the CPUSA, New Afrikans helped to frame their era's political ideas in a manner that continues to guide projects of international liberation and solidarity.

KEYWORDS Black Internationalism, New Afrikan Independence Movement, Republic of New Afrika, solidarity

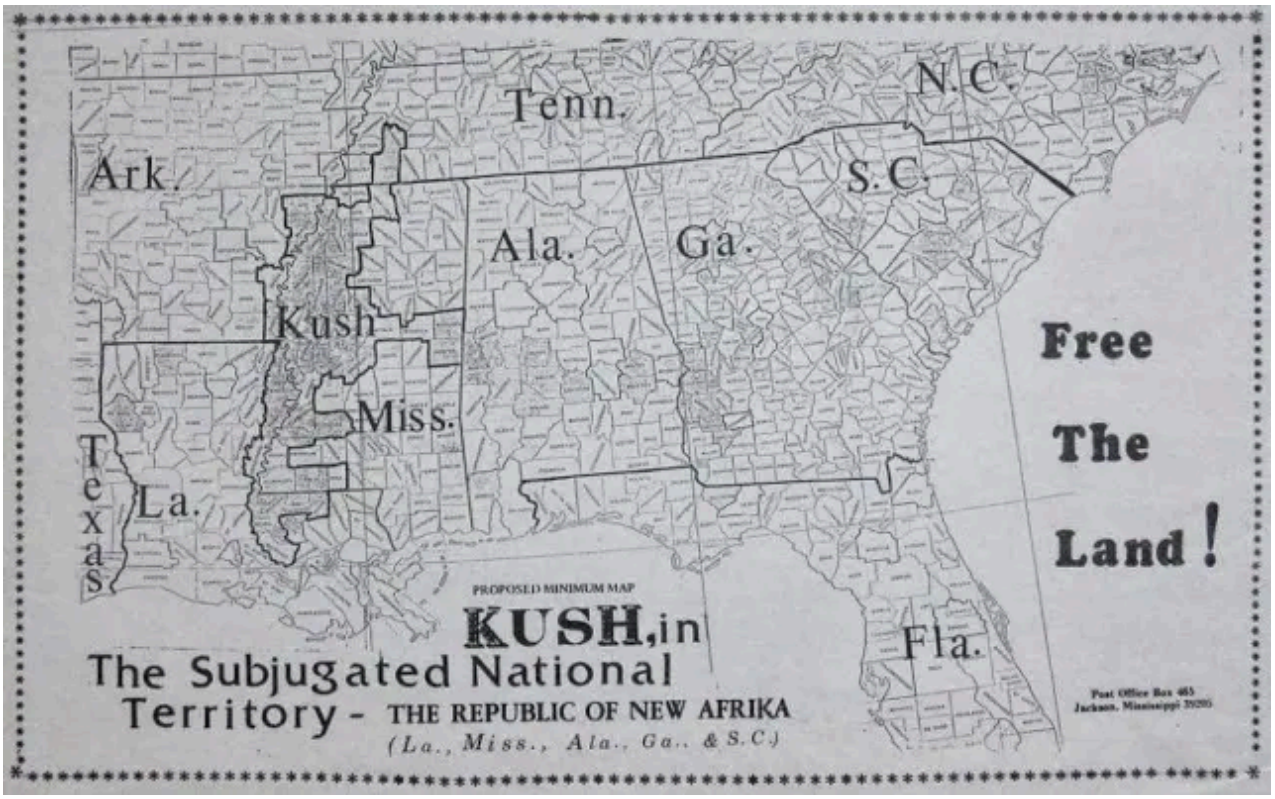
<https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/RNA-Couple-edit-Edward-O.jpeg>

Figure 1. "New Afrikan Couple," *The New Afrikan*, December 25, 1976.

The illustrated couple stands welcoming, perhaps beckoning, members of the captive New Afrikan nation to join the struggle for independence. Resembling Christian faith leaders in their demeanor and posture, the two request willing laborers for a cause greater than what any one individual can achieve and for the elevation of all humans to a new material standard of living and dignity. To those who meet the request, a promised land awaits. Importantly, the promised land is not beyond the reach of humanity on the planet earth. No. The land is available to anyone who is willing to work toward New Afrikan statehood and the common cause of global revolution. Not content with offering unrealistic utopian fantasies to skeptical, though potential, participants, the two provide a concrete vision upon which volunteers can model their future communities and nation. The high-rise buildings behind them resemble the urban realities of many. Within that landscape, the couple is careful to offer kernels of hope within a familiar setting. Just behind the New Afrikan woman, a statue of a victorious figure rises from one

of the buildings. Perhaps the building is a government headquarters where the New Afrikan leadership meet to chart the next steps in their ongoing revolutionary agenda, as an independent nation and as part of a multinational coalition. The New Afrikan woman embodies the victory of that agenda. Her proud smile and her headwrap bear the symbol that stands directly behind her. Rising from one of the buildings behind the New Afrikan man is a sphere or globe. Resembling the afro-futurist aesthetic of Sun-Ra's *Space is the Place* < https://youtu.be/bCalqwsicls> , it may symbolize the results of a planetary power shift generated by the rise to power of previously colonized and oppressed nations. These two are partners in struggle. Their liberation is tied into the success of the nation, which is their most immediate goal, and liberation of the nation both depends on and helps to fortify the global revolution and creation of a new world.[1]

In 1968, the year the New Afrikan couple's revolutionary mission began, the world was changing. New nation-states were forming as former colonies revised relationships between Africa, Asia, and the West. Some fought hard for their liberation, and some were still fighting. From Vietnam to Zimbabwe, bloody struggles against western capital and racist settlers clarified the tenacity white supremacy and imperialism. Other nations were "peacefully" exchanging white political leadership for parties and personalities rooted in local soil. All excited the US Black left which welcomed the changes as the ideal condition for their own liberation. Among them were activists who, beginning in March 1968, decided to pursue the creation of an independent nation-state that would occupy land in the US Deep South. Considering Louisiana, Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, and Georgia as the rightful territory of their Republic of New Afrika, those who championed independence sought to replicate the apparent successes of Tanzania and other newly formed states, while contributing to the complete overthrow of western hegemony.[2]



< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Kush-District-Full-Edward-O.jpg>

Figure 2. Map of the Republic of New Afrika. Courtesy of the Ken Lawrence collection, 1940-2010, HCLA 6312, Special Collections Library, University Libraries, Pennsylvania State University.

The ongoing New Afrikan struggle for land and independence is ripe with opportunities to explore how its advocates negotiated their African ancestry and a perceived colonized status with their distinctly American position within geopolitics. In asserting their right to self-determination, New Afrikans complicated the meanings of captivity and Third World solidarity in ways that were unique to the Black Power era but that continue to have resonance. Even as they built on the Black internationalism of predecessors, from the African Blood Brotherhood, the Universal Negro Improvement Association, the Civil Rights Congress and more, and worked alongside their Black, Brown, and Indigenous domestic and international contemporaries, New Afrikans helped to put forth a vision of international decolonization as essential to Black liberation.

Simultaneously, New Afrikans have viewed the destruction of western global hegemony as partially dependent on their own movement for land and independence. Therefore, they viewed solidarity between historically oppressed peoples as crucial to global revolution. Such ideas continue to guide the New Afrikan Independence Movement (NAIM) and provide a useful framework for anyone who is concerned with modern-day "Third Worlding," or the creation of a geopolitical order that values the wellbeing of people and the planet over capitalist models of never-ending economic growth and the hyper-individualist accumulation of power and profits.

Visions of New Afrikan Independence and a New Geopolitical Order

New Afrikans began working toward their vision of statehood during the final weekend in March 1968 when hundreds of the leading activists and thinkers of their era convened in Detroit, Michigan to determine a new political agenda for Black people in the United States. Called together by brothers Gaidi and Imari Obadele, dignitaries of the Black nationalist left, including Betty Shabazz, Amiri Baraka, Herman and Iyaluua Ferguson, and honorable elder "Queen Mother" Audley Moore participated in the convention. Also present were dozens of other men and women who were playing important roles in their local communities and across the country. During their time together, participants discussed some of the most important topics of the movement. Everything from working with captured revolutionary activists and denoting them as political prisoners and prisoners of war to demanding reparations and struggling over sexism and ingratitude toward women in the movement received some consideration. The space they made for critical dialogue of this nature led up to the creation of the Provisional Government of the Republic of New Afrika and the discussion and acceptance of a declaration of independence. With Queen Mother Moore leading the way, well

over one hundred people signed on. The document signaled their intent to guide their people to struggle for liberation and statehood. In addition, the document committed those who signed on to fight against "oppression wherever it assaults mankind in the world." New Afrikan independence, therefore, was framed as a project of international solidarity and global revolution.[3]

These ideas took root within the strategies and tactics of the NAIM and would have implications well into the twenty-first century. In 1973, with the systematic imprisonment of many freedom fighters from the United States to South Africa and elsewhere, New Afrikans and their comrades from several well-respected organizations created International Solidarity Day for African Prisoners of War. Recognizing people at home and abroad who were imprisoned due to their political beliefs and their actions in pursuit of liberation, these activists helped solidify the foundation upon which ongoing efforts for the release of political prisoners would build. Activists put these activities in motion even as the Provisional Government was circulating its demands for financial restitution as partial payment to Black people for centuries of oppression, including enslavement and its aftermath of segregation, economic exploitation, and unrelenting anti-Black violence. The language of the New Afrikan reparations demand and the consistent efforts of independence activists helped bring about the 1987 call to establish the National Coalition of Blacks for Reparations in America. And through praxis around these and other issues, the Provisional Government and other New Afrikan formations such as the New Afrikan People's Organization struggled internally to identify and challenge sexism within their formations. As with similar struggles in other organizations, such efforts were driven by the women in the movement and initially resulted in increased representation of women in key leadership positions. However, over time and in step with broader societal trends, efforts to destroy misogyny, sexism, and patriarchy continued to challenge activists to internalize the idea that simple visibility of women cannot replace much-needed comprehensive change. On all

three fronts—political prisoners and prisoners of war, reparations struggle, and challenging sexism—New Afrikans continue to struggle.[4]

Paper-Citizens in the US Settler State

New Afrikan understandings of solidarity are rooted partially in the view that the Republic of New Afrika is the "captive" Black nation in the United States. According to the main theorists behind the independence movement, they are African-descended people who, due to human trafficking and enslavement, and ongoing racist and economic oppression, had been deprived of their original nationalities even as they continued to be victimized by the US empire. In other words, the Republic of New Afrika are those whom we commonly refer to as Black people or African Americans. At the same time, RNA theorists made space for more recent African and African-descended immigrants and non-African peoples. Japanese American activist Yuri Kochiyama's New Afrikan citizenship is a prime example of how race and ancestry were not the only criteria for inclusion within the New Afrikan nation. New Afrikans have made claims to the five-state territory that also goes by the name Republic of New Afrika. Therefore, the RNA includes both people and territory.[5]

Gaidi Obadele explained that New Afrikans had a right to the five states based on legal analysis, historical study, and their understanding of repair. Accordingly, New Afrikans formed from a composite of various African peoples. As human commodities in the global trade of Africans, these disparate groups were forced together in bondage and enslavement. Theft of their bodies, labor, and intellectual gifts placed them in close proximity with assorted Europeans, as well as captives from Indigenous nations (some who also were enslaved and trafficked globally), and Native peoples who continued to variously negotiate between, collude with, and wage war against European settlers. As these groups came into contact, they built relationships through violence and assent (ostensibly) that led to progeny

who, over time, formed a unique position and political group as a captive African nation in the United States.[6]

With this historical background in mind, the original New Afrikan independence theorists contended with the contradictions of being forced denizens within the US empire. Their claims exposed a number of important conditions that deserve attention. Foremost, is the New Afrikan claim that they are "paper-citizens." The term indicates that, although federal law has considered Africans born in the United States as citizens, that legal designation belies a history of captivity and a forced, yet incomplete, inclusion within the US nation-state. Imari Obadele wrote that the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution ended the practice of legal slavery except as a punishment for a crime, effectively making African and African-descended people a free nation. At that point, they should have been given reparations for all that the United States and its citizens stole from them, and they should have had ample opportunity to determine what their best options were with regard to where to live and under whose government. However, New Afrikans have claimed that the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment robbed their ancestors of the power to make that determination on their own terms. Because the amendment applied the concept of birthright citizenship on them, it effectively recaptured Black people and made the briefly free nation vulnerable to continued violence and exploitation by actors at all levels of government. They were called citizens on paper; but in reality, they did not enjoy many of the rights and responsibilities that came with that designation.[7]

Black Nation Day '86

The D.C. Unit of the Provisional Government supports the Liberation Struggle of the indigenous peoples of North America. Together we shall dwell on the land in prosperity and harmony.

"When, a century after Columbus' plague of genocide in the islands, Englishmen were able to put down their first permanent colony in the West, at a place they would call Jamestown, Virginia, the Powhatans, who lived there, had already heard stories of the dreadful and uncivilized ways of the Whites. They would not give gifts... and welcome these strangers as brothers; they now had reason to regard them as invaders."

Imari Obadele

Independence ▬ ■ ■ Land ■ ■ ▬ Self-Determination

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Solidarity_Page_1-Edward-O.jpg>

Figure 3. "Black Nation Day '86," *Black Nation Day Commemorative Journal*, 1986.

Being paper-citizens calls into question what it has meant to exist as an oppressed people within a settler colony-state. What has characterized the complicated relationships between African and African-descended peoples, European settler-colonizers and their progeny, and the diversity of Indigenous nations? It is commonly understood that the conditions through which New Afrikans began to struggle for liberation originated in a pan-European invasion and conquest of lands now called the Americas.[8] Within the unfolding of "discovery," settlement, and expansion, a number of historical imaginaries emerged. The mythos propagated from the view of the colonizer claims that noble communities escaping religious and political persecution arrived on "virgin" shores where they were able, through individual hard work, ingenuity within adverse conditions, and resilience in the face of ever-impending disaster, to build the most powerful and free nation the world has yet seen. In the process, they tamed "uninhabited" wild lands, produced the world's leading democracy, and became the beacon of liberty for all who care to join in their honorable project.[9] Historian Lorenzo Veracini makes clear that the establishment of the US nation-state depended on the constant negotiation of multiple relationships, not least those with "indigenous Others" and "abject Others." African and African-descended people fall into the last category. He writes, "These people are disconnected from their land and communities, are the subject of segregative practices that are construed as enduring, and are principally characterized by restrained mobility (the absolute opposite of a settler capacity for unfettered mobility)."[10] As victims and survivors of a settlement colony-state, the ancestors of self-proclaimed New Afrikans had to overcome the overwhelming challenge of existing in daily (re)negotiation with those who were in the process of forging and developing a new nation, as well as the Indigenous peoples who experienced genocide, dispossession, international enslavement, and a cycle of treaties, broken promises, and war. Under such conditions, the precarity of Black captivity

was clear and helped guide New Afrikans toward a framework of solidarity that attempted to find justice and repair for themselves and those whom they identified as having common cause domestically and internationally.

Solidarity and the Praxis of Liberation

Because they were brought into the American project primarily as enslaved captives, African people's position within the settler colony-state was complicated, and troubled how Africans would interact with their captors and with the Indigenous nations whose own dealings with European settlers were also complex. On the one hand, history shows the various ways that African and Indigenous peoples collaborated in opposition to a common Euro-American enemy. New Afrikans point to the development of the Seminoles as an important moment of solidarity and cooperation.[11] On the other hand, this history is also saturated with examples of mutual mistrust and hostility. As historian Tiya Miles explains, some Indigenous peoples participated in the enslavement of Africans. There is also evidence that significant numbers of Black people were loyal to expanding white settlement and participated in wars against and massacres of Native peoples. Examples from pre-Civil War Texas to the Buffalo Soldiers during the era of General Custer's campaigns in the American West confirm that not all African Americans saw it as in their interest to side with the Comanche or Navajo against forces such as Texas Rangers and the United States military.[12] Honest assessment of the history meant that New Afrikans could not use myths about a perfect Black-Indigenous friendship to help justify their claims to the five-state territory. Instead, they had to develop a projection of their struggle that considered the reality of their historic condition while clearly laying out the possibilities of solidarity moving forward.

< https://csalateral.org/wp/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/Aparthied-Kills-Edward-O.jpg>

Figure 4. "Apartheid Kills!" *The New Afrikan Journal*, no date, 31.

The Code of Umoja, or the New Afrikan constitution, attempts to do just that. Therein we see that "It shall be the policy of the Provisional Government to recognize the just *claims* of the American Indian Nations" which conflict with New Afrikans' territorial interests.[13] New Afrikan Ahmed Obafemi articulated the notion this way: "Soaked in New Afrikan blood and cultivated in New Afrikan labor, for three hundred years the birthplace of New Afrikan babies, and the burial places of New Afrikan ancestors, this land became New Afrika, portions of the land subject only to the just claims of the Native American population."[14] Both statements affirm the overlapping interests in the land, even as they put forth a vision of cooperation that could undermine the legacy of settler colonialism. Instead of fighting over stolen land, New Afrikans suggested a peaceful resolution. Importantly, the suggestions here do not and cannot fully restore either group to its pre-colonial status. Instead, repair put into focus the injustices perpetrated by

European settlers as a way to anchor support for mutual claims and efforts at self-determination. According to Obafemi, "We must support each other in our drive to liberate our respective nations. In solidarity our respective liberation struggles must tear the guts out of this imperialist state, thereby serving our people, and indeed, serving the world."[15] In other words, because the United States has been a hegemonic global entity, successfully liberating the Republic of New Afrika and returning various lands to Indigenous nations would fatally injure the US empire. The successes of oppressed peoples in the United States would create opportunities for the colonized elsewhere to likewise overcome Western hegemony and build.

The ideas that New Afrikans wrote into their founding documents continued to resonate, even as the political conditions changed over time. From decades old New Afrikan print media to modern-day social media, onlookers can discern how independence activists have consistently theorized solidarity as key to global revolution and the creation of a new world. The *New Afrikan Journal* of the 1980s, for example, included an international section that offered analysis of how domestic oppression was just one aspect of worldwide white supremacy. Much like their counterparts in other Black Power era formations, New Afrikans remained attentive to brutality of US military campaigns abroad. Calling for a halt to wars of imperial aggression in Asia, Central America, and elsewhere, New Afrikans made clear that they stood in opposition to the US war machine. Besides being a driving force of imperial violence, US militarism also absorbed disproportionate numbers of Black youth, sending them to fight for Uncle Sam overseas as the US state continued to wage war against New Afrikans at home. By the 1980s the victory of Zimbabwe and the fever-pitched struggle against South African apartheid were visible in New Afrikan print culture.[16]

More recently, New Afrikans have used social media platforms such as Facebook and to highlight and encourage international solidarity. As part of its Black August Resistance programming in 2020, the Malcolm X Grassroots Movement <

https://freethelandmxgm.org/> (MXGM) hosted a panel of New Afrikan, Caribbean, and South American activists. It provided space for international and multilingual explanations of what was happening on the ground in the panelists' respective areas; and the activists expressed and encouraged practical terms for maintaining solidarity while unifying around common issues and concerns. Importantly, this panel and the breadth of Black August Resistance online offerings were intergenerational, reminding viewers that protracted struggle requires the constant collaboration of elders and youth, even as they build relationships with comrades of various nations.[17]

These are just a few ideas upon which the diversity of current day intellectuals and organizers may draw upon for inspiration as they continue to challenge oppression domestically and globally. New Afrikan independence activists teach us that solidarity cannot be based on oversimplified narratives that ignore the very real harms that oppressed peoples have perpetrated against one another, either as active agents or as complicit bystanders. True solidarity must confront such harms, promote interpersonal healing, and encourage the reimagining of how the world may look in the aftermath of an interlocking and multifaceted struggle for the liberation of all. Although New Afrikan praxis took as guaranteed the existence of nation-states, modern-day activists must determine whether such formulations need remain in place. In fact, even within the NAIM, that question has come up. New Afrikan freedom fighter Kuwasi Balagoon was an anarchist who theorized New Afrikan and Third World liberation, even as he challenged the assumption that the nation-state must remain the primary mode of organization in the aftermath of revolution.[18] New Afrikans' historical praxis, along with independence activists' modern-day efforts to build on the legacies of these revolutionary forebears, offer ideas that current-day activists can rework as needed to fill their specific needs.

Conclusion

The development of international solidarity among historically oppressed peoples has been a central key feature of the NAIM since its founding in 1968. As such, New Afrikans helped carry a black internationalist politic that preceded them from the Black Power era into the twenty-first century. Conceived during a moment of global anticolonial movements, the New Afrikan approach to solidarity was based on careful historical analysis and practical strategizing. As African and Asian peoples fought for independence on their own terms, New Afrikans sought ways to develop a praxis of liberation that would benefit all who were seeking to build new nations while simultaneously bringing an end to Western hegemony.The New Afrikan model of solidarity has the potential to inform the current efforts of people who are concerned with Third Worlding, in this case developing and maintaining mutually beneficial power relationships outside the capitalist and white supremacist framework. Working together across cultural and national boundaries is an important project for people who are interested in bringing about a society and world that is based on international cooperation, respect for human rights, upgrading human dignity, and slowing the devastation of capitalist-driven climate change.[19] The New Afrikan Independence Movement offers one example of building international solidarity and stands in line with other Black Power era and modern-day efforts. The Black Alliance for Peace < https://blackallianceforpeace.com/> , Pan-African Community Action < https://www.pacapower.org/about-us> , independent media such as The Real News Network < https://therealnews.com/> , and Breakthrough News < https://www.breakthroughnews.org/> , and more all provide complementary and highly accessible models for learning about and connecting to the global struggles against oppression. Like the most recent efforts of Malcolm X Grassroots Movement and other New Afrikans, they build upon a centuries-long legacy of activism while compelling us to continue the struggle for the creation of a better world.

Notes

1. *Space is the Place*, directed by John Coney (San Francisco: North American Star System, 1974), 85 min., YouTube, https://youtu.be/bCalqwsicls < https://youtu.be/bCalqwsicls> .

2. The founders of the movement originally spelled Africa with a *c*. They began using the *k* in the mid-1970s. See Edward Onaci, *Free the Land: The Republic of New Afrika and the Pursuit of a Black Nation-State* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020), 106–107. For Black Internationalism, see Charisse Burden-Stelly and Gerald Horne, "From Pan-Africanism to Black Internationalism," in *The Routledge Handbook of Pan-Africanism*, ed. Reiland Rabaka (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 69–86; Minkah Makalani, "Internationalizing the Third International: The African Blood Brotherhood, Asian Radicals, and Race, 1919–1922," *Journal of African American History* 96, no. 2 (Spring 2011): 151–178; and Cynthia A. Young, *Soul Power: Culture, Radicalism, and the Making of a U.S. Third World Left* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006).

3. "Congressional Hearing, 'Riots, Civil and Criminal Disorders,'" reel 16, ser. 12, frames 397–402, RAM; Proposal: The Provisional Government," reel 10, group 1, ser. 4, frame 138, ROB; and The Republic of New Afrika, "Declaration of Independence," Courtesy of General Kuratibisha X Ali Rashid.

4. Letter from Leslie Ann Tolbert, 19 February 1973, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Box 1, Series 1, Folder 2; National Coalition of Blacks For Reparations in America, "About Us," http://ncobra.org/aboutus/index.html < http://ncobra.org/aboutus/index.html> ; Republic of New Afrika, "Declaration of Independence,"; and "Revolution without Women Ain't Happening," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsrk4hBtVeA < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bsrk4hBtVeA> .

5. Onaci, *Free the Land*, 59–71; Diane C. Fujino, *Heartbeat of the Struggle: The Revolutionary Life of Yuri Kochiyama* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

6. Gaidi Obadele, "An Independent Black Republic in North America," in *Black Separatism and Social Reality: Rhetoric and Reason*, ed. Raymond L. Hall (New York: Pergamon, 1977), 33–39. For historical analysis of this process and its accompanying violence and theft, see Michael A. Gomez, *Exchanging Our Country Marks: The Transformation of African Identities in the Colonial and Antebellum South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1998); and Jennifer Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

7. Imari Abubakari Obadele and Atty. Gaidi Obadele ({slave name} Milton R. Henry), *The Article Three Briefs: Establishing the Legal Case for the Existence of the Black Nation the Republic of New Africa in North America*, June 25, 1973, 13–21, courtesy of Ukali

Mwendo. For the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments, see *Constitution Annotated: Analysis and Interpretation of the U.S. Constitution* https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution < https://constitution.congress.gov/constitution/> .

8. For example, see Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism: The Roots of Slavery, White Supremacy, and Capitalism in Seventeenth-Century North America and the Caribbean* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018).

9. Frederick Jackson Turner, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Proceedings of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, December 14, 1893, esp. 221–222.

10. Lorenzo Veracini, *Settler Colonialism: A Theoretical Overview* (London: Palgrave Macmillan Publishers Limited, 2010), 28.

11. Akinyele O. Umoja, "Settler-Colonialism and the New Afrikan Liberation Struggle," *The Palgrave Encyclopedia of Imperialism and Anti-Imperialism* (Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature, 2019), 3. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6_78-1 < https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-91206-6_78-1> .

12. Tiya Miles, *Ties That Bind: The Story of An Afro-Cherokee Family in Slavery and Freedom* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005); Kenneth Wiggins Porter, "Negroes and Indians on the Texas Frontier, 1831–1876," *The Journal of Negro History* 41, no. 4 (October 1956): 285–310; Theda Purdue, *Cherokee Women: Gender and Culture Change, 1700–1835* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1998).

13. The Republic of New Afrika, The Code of Umoja, courtesy of General Kuratibisha X Ali Rashid.

14. Ahmed Obafemi, "Building Strategic Alliances and People's War: National Liberation Inside the u.s. Imperialist State," in New Afrikan Institute for Political Education, *Toward the Liberation of the Black Nation: Organize for New Afrikan People's War!*, 1981, 17–22, Freedom Archives Online, https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC515_scans/515.naipe.peoplesWar.81.pdf < https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC515_scans/515.naipe.peoplesWar.81.pdf> .

15. Obafemi, "Building Strategic Alliances."

16. For example, "Provisional Government Demands U.S. Halt Panama Aggression, Disengage Black Troops and Pay Reparations," *The New Afrikan Special Issue* (Spring 1990): 14, courtesy of Nkechi Taifa; "The National Committee for Pan-Afrikan Democracy and Prosperity Host His Excellency and Our Brother Robert Mugabe, Prime Minister of the Republic of Zimbabwe," *The New Afrikan Journal*, no date, 27, courtesy of Nkechi Taifa.

17. Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, "International Solidarity: Connecting Struggle for Self-Determination" August 17, 2020,

https://www.facebook.com/events/678409293021275 < https://www.facebook.com/events/678409293021275> . For international news and multi-national solidarity from New Afrikan Independence Movement perspectives, see also Malcolm X Grassroots Movement, *BAMN News Journal*, https://freethelandmxgm.org/media < https://freethelandmxgm.org/media/> ; and Xinachtli (Alvaro Luna Hernadez), "Statement of Solidarity," *Re-Build* 2, no. 2 (Winter 2020/21): 6–7, https://www.rebuildcollective.org/events-1 < https://www.rebuildcollective.org/events-1> . ↩

18. See Kuwasi Balagoon, *A Soldier's Story: Revolutionary Writings by a New Afrikan Anarchist*, 3rd ed. (Montreal, Quebec: Kersplebedeb Publishing, 2003); and Akinyele Omowale Umoja, "Maroon: Kuwasi Balagoon and the Evolution of Revolutionary New Afrikan Anarchism," *Science & Society* 79, no. 2 (April 2015): 196–220. ↩

19. Ron Whyte, "Why We Should Care About Environmental Justice," *BAMN News Journal* 1, no. 4 (December 2019): 22–24, https://freethelandmxgm.org/2020/06/bamn-vol-1-issue-4/ < https://freethelandmxgm.org/2020/06/bamn-vol-1-issue-4/> . ↩

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Reawakening Ali Sardar Jafri's *Asia Jaag Utha*

by Maia Ramnath | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT The epic poem *Asia Jaag Utha*, written in 1950 by Ali Sardar Jafri of the Indian Progressive Writers Association, was a battle hymn of its time, a celebration of Asia's history and geography, with a vision for Asian liberation and communist revolution at the dawn of the Cold War in the aspirational Third World. Are its messages still applicable today, or is it strictly a period piece? This essay analyzes what Jafri was trying to do in his own context and explores whether it has anything to say to ours. In order to do this, the author enters into dialogue with Jafri's poetry, and proposes some updates to its political agenda that might be needed to carry its energy into the present. While the mid-twentieth century vehicles of progress and liberation (such as industrial development and the postcolonial nation-state) require critique, Jafri's emancipatory impulses and ideals of solidarity ring true.

KEYWORDS Asia, Cold War, Progressive Writers Association, anti-colonial, poetry, solidarity

WHAT

"Unlearning means not engaging with those relegated to the 'past' as 'primary sources' but rather as potential companions." —Ariella Azoulay

"Asia Jaag Utha!"

Asia has awakened.[1]

This is a wake-up call. A call to arms. A battle hymn. A victory anthem.[2] A weaponized propaganda broadcast. Written in 1950, Ali Sardar Jafri's incantatory, anti-imperialist epic Urdu poem speaks to a very particular moment: the dawn of the Cold War, and the dismantling of the modern European empires into a raft of new Asian and African states.[3]

It's an interpellation, hailing invaders, enemies, allies, ancestors, heroes and kin. What? You lookin' at me? I don't like your expression. Those days are gone when you—the colonial powers with your armies and aggressive commerce—were the masters, and we, the silently subjugated. Wretched no more, we are strong and elegant, silk and steel. There's something in the air and everything is in motion. The people march, the earth shifts. It is dawn in the east. The voice of the people is the voice of the land. The music of the people is the roar of the storms that move across it from end to end.

It's an accumulating fugue of interwoven motifs: lightning, thunder, wind, cloud, fire, sparks, stars, rainbows, dawn, springtime, eyes, tears, smiles, hands, footsteps, roads. A free-verse compendium of history and memory, lore and legend. Phalanxes of rhymed stanzas build toward the relentless pulse of each section's refrain: Get out of Asia! Rise up! We're advancing! A storm approaches the world!

Is "Asia Jaag Utha" applicable today, or a distinct period piece? Stylistically, it may seem like communist kitsch. But what about the substance of its message? In order to unpack what Jafri was saying to his own time, and whether his historical analysis and political agenda have something to say to us now, I tried something: I joined the song. Giving responses to his calls, I talked back to the poem in its own tone—easy enough to slip into, since I'd already begun echoing it in paraphrase and summary. The experiment was revealing. It answered my question better than dispassionate analysis alone had done. Somewhat to my surprise, I found that my response sounded more like a continuation than a

contradiction. Our differences were not really in the motivating impulses, but in the context-specific methods for realizing them.

Through Jafri's poem surges his Third Worldist emancipatory vision—a dream of liberation and solidarity containing much that remains nostalgically alluring, though it didn't quite come to pass as imagined or hoped. If we want to revitalize a revised Third Worldist ideal suitable as a decolonial vision for the twenty-first century, there are also aspects of that dream that it's important to critique. So I'll first try to locate the poem within its own time, and assess what Jafri is trying to do there as he illuminates the setting (Asia) and protagonists (Asians) at the heart of his political agenda; then add my proposals of what would need to change to carry its political energy into the present.

WHEN (Jafri's Context)

A prolific poet and critic, Jafri was a core member of the Indian Progressive Writers Association (PWA), a body of leftist cultural workers then at the forefront of South Asian radical politics. In the 1930s and 1940s, the PWA leadership were at the center of India's independence movement, framing it as a component of the global antifascist struggle leading up to World War II. Then in newborn India and Pakistan, they were central to the Soviet-backed Afro-Asian Writers Association (AAWA), literary wing of the Afro-Asian People's Solidarity Organization (AAPSO). Jafri dedicates this poem to the short stories of PWA General Secretary Krishan Chander, calling them "beautiful weapons in the Asian war of freedom"—which is precisely how the Progressive Writers viewed literature during this period.

To these leftist writers, the independence of 1947 was a false freedom, when not just regime change but revolution was needed. This poem is rooted in the perspective of an Indian communist in 1950—and of a Progressive Writer during

the PWA's most uncompromising hard-left moment. Jafri composed it while jailed, along with many other Communist Party of India (CPI) activists, for his support of the peasant uprising in Telangana, which had challenged the autocratic princely state of Hyderabad at the moment of its accession to the newly federated republic of India.[4] This they viewed as the true vanguard of an impending agrarian communist revolution in the subcontinent, then under attack by Nehru's bourgeois nationalist government.

Besides dissatisfaction with a partial liberation, Progressive Writers also mourned Partition, having advocated courageously for sectarian harmony. They were dedicated to the ideal of a pluralistic, composite South Asian culture and Hindustani language not divided into Sanskritized Hindi and Persianate Urdu. In the poem, Jafri sketches an Asian inheritance drawing on these elements, though without naming Pakistan, Partition, or the violent trauma it had unleashed.

Looking beyond the subcontinent to Asia as a whole, hope was high amid the dismantling of the British, French, and Portuguese empires, even as the geopolitical axis was being re-polarized between First and Second World superpowers. Beyond both, the Non-Aligned and Afro-Asian solidarity movements aimed for Third World sovereignty, autonomy, and decolonization.[5] South Asia was only the beginning: "Quit Asia" would expand upon "Quit India," the slogan of anti-British rebellion during the 1940s. It would not end until Asian defenders catapulted western military boots from Asian soil into hell or outer space. All of Asia was to follow the lead of anticolonial India and revolutionary China, toward a vision of liberation more ambitious than mere national independence. Jafri marks each spark: Korea is fighting. Burma roars. Vietnamese and Malayan guerrillas are on the move. Even beyond the vast continent, "imperialism's death on Asian soil" was a matter of globalized import: "Asia's freedom struggle is the world's struggle."[6]

Amidst Cold War internationalism, Jafri's affiliation was Afro-Asian, not Non-Aligned. He was in fact quite aligned: America was a neo-imperialist villain, the USSR an anti-imperialist champion. He names Truman, Acheson, and Marshall along with earlier British generals and colonial governors—Clive, Hastings, Wavell, O'Dwyer—juxtaposing what he sees as Chiang Kai-shek's corruption to that of Mir Jafar, the betrayer of Bengal to the British East India Company two centuries prior.

In contrast, Jafri's USSR is painted as patron, guide, defender and savior; polychromatic utopia, earthly paradise without slavery, tyranny, warmongering or oppression; an Eastern power, a federation of many Asian republics; not a national but a multinational, multiracial, and multicultural ideal for all humanity. To its critics he is savagely ruthless.[7]

Furthermore, this Soviet north star lights the way to a "grand destination," Mao's China. Jafri paints a verbal propaganda poster: Mao bestriding the Himalayas with his hand held high, pointing toward victory.[8] To Jafri in 1950, choosing Mao over Chiang, and the Chinese Communist Party over the Kuomintang, would also have implied choosing India's Communist Party (and AAPSO) over its National Congress (and NAM).

Nevertheless, Indo-Soviet friendship was promoted under Nehru through cultural exchange and economic aid. (Pakistan's government favored the US.) Film was a favored channel for soft diplomacy, and the Indian Progressive Writers participated avidly. For example, Jafri contributed the lyrics for *Pardesi* (foreigner), a 1957 joint Soviet/Indian film production written and codirected by Khwaja Ahmad Abbas.[9] Abbas, like Jafri, was a towering figure in the early years of the PWA in Bombay: screenwriter, director, journalist, novelist, memoirist. Starring actor Balraj Sahni was a founding leader of the Indian People's Theater Association, a 1943 offshoot of the PWA, and the brother of Bhisham Sahni, a later PWA General Secretary. Also known in English as *A Journey Beyond Three Seas*, *Pardesi* was based on the travelogue of a fifteenth-century Russian

merchant named Afanasi Nikitin, narrating his journey to India and relationship with a woman there. The love between Padmini and Nikitin stands in for the warm bonds of connection between Russia and India.

Abbas had also written a magazine story in 1944, "And One Did Not Come Back," which served as the basis for a 1946 film *Dr. Kotnis ki Amar Kahani* (the undying tale of Dr. Kotnis).[10] The real Dwarkanath Kotnis had traveled from India to offer medical service to the Chinese troops during the Japanese invasion. Like Nikitin, he too found love with a local woman. (As ever, in movies, to love another country and give oneself to it is embodied in a male protagonist's romantic relationship with a woman of that country.)

These historic journeys stood in for contemporary ones, together shaping the political and cultural context in which the poem operated. Yet another PWA participant, M. Kalimullah, wrote a travelogue called *Mao ki Desh Mein* (in the land of Mao) about a 1953 cultural delegation sponsored by the Chinese branch of the World Peace Council (WPC), with the goal of forging close ties through exchange and learning about each other's arts and culture.[11] The group assembled in Delhi and entered China via Hong Kong. Kalimullah records his worries and excitements —what a responsibility for artists to bear the weight of diplomacy and alliance, let alone concoct fabulous representative programming across art forms! But by the end of the journey—meeting and traveling with Chinese artists and cultural workers in Shanghai, Beijing, Nanking, Hangzhou, touring universities, sanitoriums, factories and cultural institutions–all are suffused in love and affection. The popular slogan "Hindi-Cheeni Bhai Bhai" (Indians and Chinese are brothers) is on their lips, tears in their eyes. The family feud resulting in the Sino-Indian / Sino-Soviet split was still almost a decade in the future. In the family romance of "Asia Jaag Utha," Lenin is still benevolent father to both Stalin and Mao, while China is both a fractal of the universe, and Asia's salvation.[12]

WHERE (Jafri's Geographical Imaginary)

Given the centrality of Asia here as both concept and location, what and where exactly is the terrain in question? To a world historian's eye, Jafri's Asia, sweeping from the Mediterranean to the Pacific, implicitly traces the Silk Road axis and its tributaries from Iran to China, with the subcontinent smack in the middle just across the Khyber pass, age-old gateway of armies, missionaries, traders of all sorts. Implicit too is the Indian Ocean rim as a worlding frame, weaving networks of trade and cultural influence across the eastern and western lobes of the Indian Ocean, across the Bay of Bengal or the Persian Gulf.[13]

Jafri catalogs its topography (caves, deserts, plateaus, hills, jungles); its natural abundance of fauna, flora, minerals and resources (coal, oil, iron, silver, tin, gems; mango, apple, almond, bamboo, coconut palm; spices, cotton, silkworms, handicrafts, hydropower). How can it be that the people of such a rich land are hungry? Who benefits from this wealth? Jafri echoes the economic drain theory of empire: for three hundred years ships plied the seas bearing away Asia's goods and indentured labor, "the toil of India, Burma, Malay, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey, Yemen." The West swallows mounds of cotton and silk while we "peasants, workers, cobblers, washermen and women, porters, ironsmiths" stand naked. Industrial commodity markets leave artisans and craftspeople destitute.

But in Jafri's poetic geography (versus his political economy), it's not just that the land's wealth should go to the land's people; the land *is* the people. Extraction is violent: the earth is sucked dry of oil as our bodies are of blood. So when the people fight back, the personified land fights back. Forests become the snipers they camouflage; soldiers are rivers in flood spate. What was seized will become weapons against the despoilers, as plowshares are turned into swords.[14] Insurrectionary peasants rise from the earth like seeds from the soil—not dead but

only sleeping, awaiting the springtime to sprout out reborn like the heroes of each age.[15]

True, the AAWA, AAPSO, NAM, and WPC were institutionally organized according to national units, with state-backed delegations. But what do not particularly stand out among the celebrated features of Jafri's Asian geobody[16] are the lines of national borders—so often drawn by conquerors and colonial administrators anyway, sundering some groups while forcing others together into motley states.

Instead, Jafri's horizontal pan-Asia is a pangaean supercontinent in which historical memories are not so much polyvocal as symphonic, fused into an aspirational chorale of leftist humanity, the bulk of the world's population. Even so, certain differentiations are assumed. Whereas Jafri's home, India, is the unspoken geographic center from which to view the panorama, Mao's China is first among equals. Gathering regions under China's wing, Jafri anticipates today's Belt and Road initiative strategically if not ideologically. And as in the movies, Jafri here too filters political relations into the romantic language of love poems as Nanking and Peking embrace Bukhara and Samarkand.[17] (Though here's one of our twenty-first-century questions for a mid-twentieth century blind spot: to Tibet and Xinjiang, might this then and now have felt more like rape than consensual embrace? Might Bukhara and Samarkand, then located within Soviet republics, have felt ambivalent about this flirtation?)

Nevertheless, as roads once blocked by empire now open, the renewed connections are inter-Asian and south-south, rather than metropole-colony spokes.[18] By the mid-1950s, Jafri's Pan-Asianism would converge with Pan-Africanism to yield the Afro-Asian ideal, and then in the 1960s with Latin America to form the Tricontinental global south, declaring the solidarity, cultural kinship and political commonality of the colonized world.

Such a geography—defined in the poem less by state affiliation than by relationship to the natural landscape and locations of uprising—can easily be part

of a vision for today.[19]

WHO (Jafri's historical actors)

Asia is a place. Asia is a place for Asian people. Asia is also a person, a dancing queen, decked in wind ankle bells and river necklaces.

"Now Asians will rule Asia," Jafri proclaims. But who are these Asians? The people, the place, and the poem's politics are all connected. He defines Asian identity not by race or nation, but by access to a common civilizational treasure house of richly heterogenous contents. The synthesis across ethnic, linguistic and religious boundaries—the ideal of unity in diversity, of an identity shared without being identical—applies inside Jafri's South Asia as well as across greater Asia. Additionally, his idealized Asianness is a political orientation rooted in the historical experience of (and resistance to) western imperialism.[20]

As he shakes awake family members, he maps an extended kinship starting from and then moving beyond a conventionally nationalist gendering. Mother needs her sons to avenge her and protect her chastity.[21] Then the Indian poet addresses his brother Asians: Don't be ashamed of your poverty. I'm with you and I get it. And although he starts by talking *to* his brothers *about* their suffering mothers, wives and daughters, eventually he greets the women directly too. "My sister! I recognize you" standing in the frontlines, facing bullets and holding a red flag.

This kinship comes not only through struggle but through a cultural inheritance encompassing thousands of years of heroes and villains, lovers and fighters. Rustam (hero of the Persian *Shah-nameh*), Arjuna (hero of the Sanskrit *Mahabharata*), Farhad's Shirin, Dushyanta's Shakuntala, Majnun's Laila, Ranjha's Hir. Though catholically Asian, Jafri's vantage point is still the subcontinent, as he draws primarily upon Indic and Islamicate traditions deploying the Sanskritic and Persian ingredients typical of the Progressive Writers. Those he names reflect the

literary genealogy of the Urdu PWA: Firdausi, Saadi, Nizami, Khayyam, Hafiz; the luminaries of both sufi and bhakti poetry, feeding the ghazal tradition to which the Progressives themselves were heirs; their revered immediate predecessors, Tagore and Iqbal; plus their beloved international counterparts, stars of the Afro-Asian Writers' *Lotus* era, Turkey's Nazim Hikmet and China's Lu Hsun.[22]

Jafri's inventory of Asian cultural riches stretches from the architecture of the Indus Valley's Mohenjo Daro, Ajanta's carved caverns, China's Great Wall, Mesopotamia's ancient cities; to the vast edifice of language, rhetoric, imagination, epic and lyric poetry, theology. He lists the gifts of the Vedas, Gautama Buddha (teaching equality of all), Mazdak (teaching justice and love), Christ, Mohammed . . . all stars in the ancient heavens, now witnessing the latest prophet to come bearing gifts of philosophy: Mao with his glorious Red Army.

Implicitly, Jafri inverts Macaulay's notorious "Minute on Education" proclaiming one shelf of a decent English library more valuable than everything ever written in Arabic and Sanskrit, by declaring that even Asia's ruins outvalue the whole of Britain's "idle chatter." Oh, so you don't agree? he scoffs. You say *you* brought us culture and civilization? True . . . if your culture is toxic destruction. Your gifts to us were famine, disease, poverty and ignorance. You flogged, hanged, shot and jailed us. Your "superior" culture brought the Opium Wars, drug cartels, poison, slaughter. Death was the price of your technology, with your gunboat diplomacy and railway tracks laid over corpses. Though you built victory memorials, stole souvenirs for museum exhibits, the true monuments are not in art or architecture but in the marks left on our bodies and lives. The display of capitalist culture is told in Asia's afflictions.[23]

Nevertheless, the poet does not map his *us* and *them, we* and *you,* onto a simple axis of East and West. This is not a clash of civilizations, but a clash between the forces of invasion and resistance. The Boxers, the Taiping, the Sepoy Mutiny, centuries of revolts and insurrections, all were battles in the same long war of

peasants rising against empires. Similarly, Jafri scrambles the lines of today's divisions in the subcontinent when identifying who's on which side of justice or oppression. The lines he draws within South Asia are not between Hindu and Muslim, any more than the lines he draws in the larger world are between Orient and Occident; but rather between agrarian insurgents and imperial oppressors in all their guises.[24] Indeed some of his most notable examples are Asian on Asian: Ismailis versus Abbasids and Mongols, Marathas and Pathans versus Mughals. (The Mughals are a unique case, standing in sometimes for Asia's cultural, political, material and military glory, and sometimes for Empire resisted by Asia's local freedom fighters, peasants and poets.)[25]

Colonizers are liars and despoilers, violent and greedy. But traitors and collaborators are worse, because they should know better. They too were nourished here. But they sold out their own, for dollars. These are not the Asians who shall rule Asia. Jafri doesn't even want to utter the polluting sounds of their names: pimps to the brothels of Britain, France and America. "Ask your leaders, your native masters": you think you're free but if you are, then why are American and British troops still camped on your soil? Why are you fighting for rather than against their empires? As recently as the last war, Indian soldiers had fought Britain's battles.

Asia has experienced uncountable Alexanders, invaders from all directions, Jafri records. Demons are of all colors, forms and origins: this way a Ravana (many-headed demon-villain of the Hindu epic *Ramayana*), that way a Zahhak (another multi-headed foe, Ahura Mazda's snaky nemesis from Persian mythology). Here, there and everywhere, agents of the British Raj. (By 1950, doesn't "vile Churchill" know that "contemptible Kipling" has died?)

However, if traitors and oppressors come in all colors, so do those who serve freedom and justice.[26] No essentialist, Jafri embraces Western good guys just as he indicts Asian bad guys. So hold hands, everyone! Not only Asia's awakened

communist workers and peasants, but those of all the world, workers of all races united as one. We are all the rays of the same sun, the strings of one instrument, the waves of one ocean, all “inhabitants of one earth /. . . believers in one humanity; / There is neither a West nor an East . . . Life sings the songs of peoples′ victory.”[27]

Such a cultural identity (syncretic rather than purist, reclaimed for decolonial practice), and such a political identity (based in affinities of ethical commitment and relativity to power, rather than exclusive essences) are also compatible with a vision for today.

ONWARD . . . (To Jafri, an Homage)

Wake up! Wake up!
New morning or a minute to midnight,
there’s no more time
and it’s the perfect time.
The waters are rising and so must we (said my comrades in the climate crisis movement)
The people of the world are on the move
flooding over the lines scored on maps, incised on borders,
(cuts upon her body our body my body)
erasing them sure as waves sweep clean the sand.
We are coming, we are coming,
in currents converging across the land,
pressing on the dams of state and nation,
rising together with laughing waters, soaring mountains, dancing forests.

Oil companies, mining companies, monoculturists, militaries,
will not suck her blood, drain her body, drink her milkshake.

Nor shall we ourselves deplete her, thriving only by demanding no sacrifice of mothers, fathers, golden geese.

Hands raised to reach the stars we come,
hands outstretched to receive each other we come,
hands sparkling, snapping, consensing we come.
The winds rise, the waters rise, the people rise
in revitalization, resurgence,
restoring our living as the living of the land,
healing the depredations not only of the empires and capitalists
but of the newborn states and nationalists.

Sharing masala melange,
sharing hallows cross-fertilized and freely exchanged,
harnessing old ways, knowledge and treasures of deep time
to the conscious conscientious science of tomorrow
with the power to choose and judge,
examining both old and new technologies
not just for the magnitude of their capacities
but for the purposes to which these powers are applied.
Heeding Ocalan, Marcos and Ramona,
hearing Boggs, hooks, Davis, LaDuke, Barghouti, Kaba, so many more,
not as gurus and avatars but as but as siblings and elders,
fallible admirable teachers,
questioning and challenging as we listen and learn

Is it dawn or dusk?
Are these spring zephyrs or winter winds?
Doesn't matter, it is all in motion, and we are on the move together
forging bonds of friendship, reciprocity, symbiosis

out of all our rooted and routed particularity,
solidarity, planetarity.

Here's what I learned by trying to sing back to Jafri in his own mode. Where the music of his time harmonizes with the needs of ours is in the exuberant impulse toward liberation of land and people, rejection of imperialism and capitalism, transcendence of race and nation. Where the tunes diverge is in the containers for realizing them in the Cold War Afro-Asian context: industrial development; the postcolonial nation-state; Marxism-Leninism-Maoism. Yet the poem's internal contradictions contain the dialectical seeds of its own sublation.

First, Jafri derided western civilization for the dubious gifts of its technology, its infrastructure of extraction (of minerals, plantation crops, labor, fossil fuels, forest goods, water) for commodities bought by the destruction of Asian land, bodies, blood. He also praised the USSR as it "brought under control rebellious rivers and wind," taming wild nature to yield not destruction and exploitation but progress and prosperity; for laborers dignity and bread. Yet throughout the poem he also celebrates this very rebelliousness of rivers and wind, forests and mountains rising up against oppression. While Jafri distinguishes the goals of Soviet technology from those of the West, we must criticize state-socialist industrial development as much as the capitalist version, for its legacy of environmental despoliation. Given Jafri's rapture with Asia's lush nature, painting the land itself as alive and sentient, perhaps today he would participate enthusiastically in the robust conversation emerging through ecosocialism and social ecology toward a greener left paradigm shift.

Furthermore, in Jafri's time the nation-state bore people's hopes for institutionalizing decolonization. But as with extractive industry, no matter in which peoples' name the state is constituted, the very form itself carries destructive risk and limitations. The new states drew their borders on the lines established by colonial administrations and prior conquests, in many cases

cutting through the homelands of “minority” groups that didn’t fit within state borders and may not have chosen to be incorporated anyway. These are the very groups now likely to feel marginalized, dispossessed, disenfranchised, militarily occupied, and exploited without sufficient representation, on the frontlines of domestic neocolonial resource extraction. After all, the new national governments inherited not only territorial boundaries but also political, legal, military, penal and disciplinary structures, appropriating them from the former imperial regimes instead of abolishing them.

While the federations of solidarity Jafri participated in were organized in national state units, the poem itself is intrinsically neither nationalist nor statist. With its natural topography and map of resistance, it carries a latent sense of the linked fate of earth, land, people and nature beyond borders. So might Jafri here too have been interested in joining conversations that now go beyond the Cold War-era third worldist vision to a fourth-worldist one, meaning one that can take a step beyond the compromised vision of postcolonial Afro-Asian nation-states? One that can think instead in bioregions capable of confronting ecological crises, and in alternative sovereignties capable of facilitating the self-determination and revitalization of indigenous and other marginalized or minoritized communities? One that can address, in addition to the classic modern empires, contemporary settler colonialism as well as the neocolonial legacy of the mid-twentieth century world powers, including that which has since been wrought by the new states formed in the era of “Asia Jaag Utha”?

Finally, to many people in Jafri’s context (and to Afro-Asian revolutionists and international solidarity activists into the 1970s), Maoism meant militancy and revolution as opposed to gradualism and co-optability or adjustment to the capitalist world. Moreover it signified anticolonialism, beyond mere anticapitalism.[28] Stalin’s death and Krushchev’s revelations were several years away. Regardless, it’s impossible now to echo Jafri’s uncritical praise for Lenin, Stalin, and Mao.

Of course, these three criticisms are interlinked. It was authoritarian, top-down states that wrought violence upon their own people and lands in the drive toward fast-tracked modernization, industrialization, and homogenization in the name of decolonization. Still, notwithstanding Jafri's deification of certain charismatic dictators, those processes are not what the poem is about. Despite the dogmatic ring of slogans, his political superego cannot contain his irrepressible poetic id. Its energy overspills the institutional structures of his loyalties. Today, we need reimagined political forms, economies, energy regimes, modes of production, affiliations and cultures. In *Asia Jaag Utha,* these possibilities are conceivable as places that might be reached along the roads the poem begins to unfurl—even if we might need to pause at various crossroads and debate with Jafri, or even hold an impromptu people's assembly, seeking new consensus to decide which way to go on. Trying to respond to the poem in its own language helped clarify for me how much (very much!) we can still connect to its expansive liberatory music, plus what points we should critically revise if we're to carry the potentials of the energies it releases into the twenty-first century.

Notes

1. Note on translation: in the excerpted sections, the Urdu is transliterated from Ali Sardar Jafri, *Eshiya Jaag Utha* (Delhi: Maktabah-yi Shāhrah, 1952), accessed at https://www.rekhta.org/ebooks/asia-jag-utha-ali-sardar-jafri-ebooks. English passages as quoted are from Carlo Coppola, trans., "Asia Has Awakened" as part of the *MULOSIGE Translations* < http://mulosige.soas.ac.uk/resources/translations/> project, accessed at http://mulosige.soas.ac.uk/asia-has-awakened-ali-sardar-jafri/ < http://mulosige.soas.ac.uk/asia-has-awakened-ali-sardar-jafri/> . In addition, I freely paraphrase and synthesize from the original throughout this piece. ↩

2. "This poetry is not poetry / It's the sound of the battle hymn, the thunder of the cloud, the storm's voice, / Hearing it, the mountains come, donning a snow plume on their green forehead, / Weaving the garlands of red flames in their hair of smoke; / The oceans come, sounding the ankle-bells of the surf; / The wind comes, swinging the blue slingshots of its gusts; / Clouds come, riding on lightning. . ."
"yeh shairi shairi nahin hai / Rajaz ki avaaz badalon ki garaj hai, tufaan ki sada hai ki jinko sunkar / Pahron ate hain, sabz maathon par barf ki kalkhiaan lagaye / dhuen ke baalon men surkh sholon har goondhe / samundar aate hain, jhaag ki jhaanjnen bajaate

/ havae ati hain, apni jhonkon ke neelgon gophanen ghamaate / ghataaen aati hain apne, bjalion par sowar hokar. . .” ↩

3. See Manu Bhagavan, *India and the Cold War* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2019); Srinath Raghavan, *War and Peace in Modern India* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Paul McGarr, *The Cold War in South Asia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013). ↩

4. Anil Sehgal, ed., *Ali Sardar Jafri: The Youthful Boatman of Joy* (New Delhi: Bharatiya Jnanpith, 2001), 32, 64; Shaukat Kaifi, *Kaifi and I*, trans. Nasreen Rehman (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2009). See also Mushirul Hasan, *Roads to Freedom: Prisoners in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105–8; Bruce B. Lawrence. *The Bruce B. Lawrence Reader: Islam beyond Borders*, ed. Ali Altaf Mian (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). ↩

5. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) and the Afro-Asian People’s Solidarity Organization (AAPSO) were both institutionally formalized a few years after *Asia Jaag Utha*, in 1955 and 1957 respectively. ↩

6. “Imperialism is in its death throes on Asian soil; / Monarchy’s crown is being kicked by Asia’s feet; / Today Asia celebrates Asia’s freedom / In Asian blood shines the brilliant hue of the Eastern dawn! / Get out of Asia! // Asia’s freedom struggle is the world’s struggle. . .”
“Asia ki;’ / ? khaak par dam torhta hai samraaj / Asia ki thorkaron me hai malukiyet ki taaj / Asia men Asia ka jashn azadi hai aaj / Asia ke khoon men hai subah-e-mashraq ka rachao / Asia se bhaag jao // Asia ki jang-e-azadi hai ek duniya ki jang. . .” ↩

7. By contrast, Jafri’s contemporary N. M. Rashed wrote critically of the USSR as a Russocentric oil merchant behaving like an imperial power in western and central Asia. See Sean Pue’s contrasting analysis of Rashed’s 1957 poem *Iran men Ajnabi* (a stranger in Iran), which points more to alienation than identification between Asian national cultures and histories. Rashed also calls out the “disjuncture between Communist ideology and Soviet practice” (Sean Pue, “Ephemeral Asia: Position without Identity in the Modernist Urdu Poetry of N.M. Rashed,” *Comparative Literature* 64, no. 1 (Winter 2012): 82). Progressive novelist Yashpal had done this too: see Corinne Friend, “Yashpal: Fighter for Freedom, Writer for Justice,” *Journal of South Asian Literature* 13, no. 1/4 (Fall-Winter-Spring-Summer 1977–1978), 65–90; Ania Loomba, *Revolutionary Desires*: *Women, Communism, and Feminism in India* (Philadelphia: Routledge, 2018). ↩

8. “The curved eyebrow of beloved China enchants the hearts; / The banner of fiery twilight colour augments the redness of the blood; / Mao’s hand held high points to the road of victory and triumph; / Mao stands atop the Himalayas and calls to Asia: / A storm approaches the world. / A storm approaches the world.”
“Lachakta abru nigaar Cheen ka dilon par jaadu chala raha hai / dahakta rang shafaq ka parcham lahu ki surkhi barha raha hai /{buland jo deka} haath fatih-o-zafar ka rasta

dikhala raha hai / Himalya par khara hai Mao aur Asia ko bula raha hai / jahan men tufaan aa raha hai / jahan men tufaan aa raha hai." ↩️

9. Music from *Pardesi:*

Phir Milenge Jane Wale Yar Dusvidaniya

Na Ja Na Ja Balam Naa Dir Deem

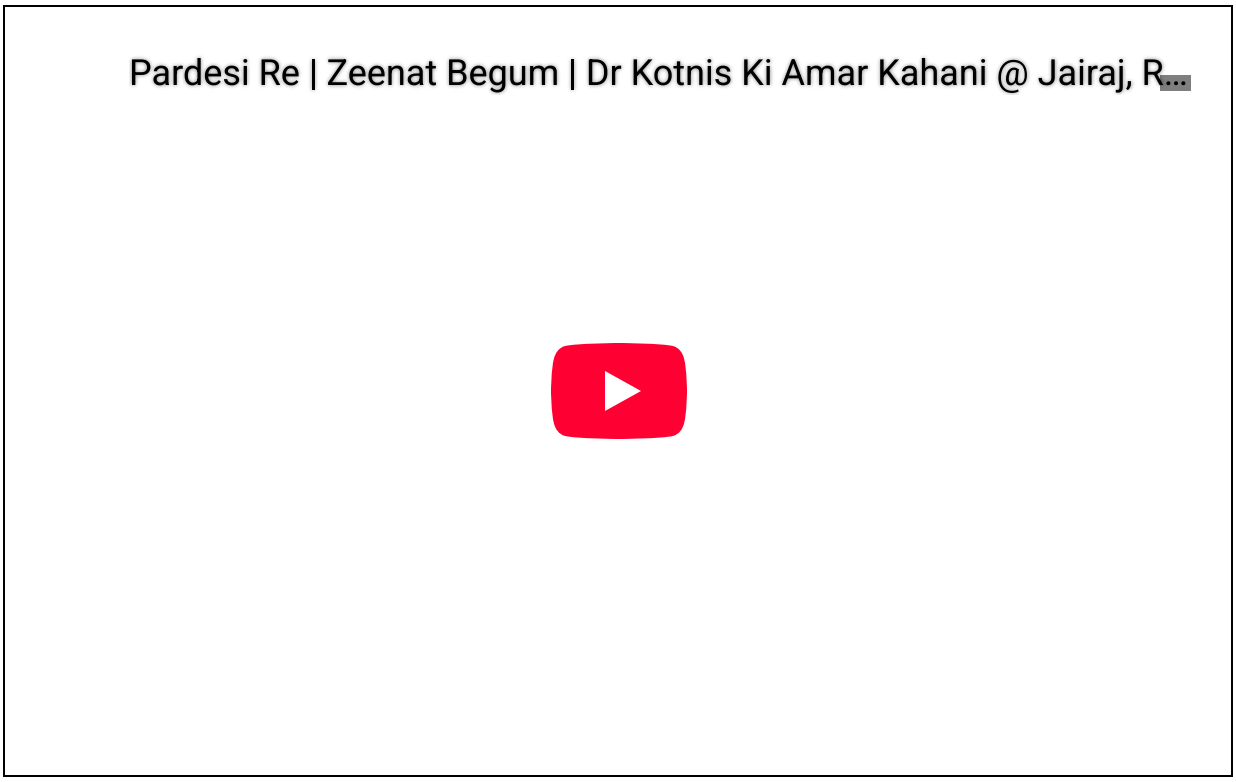
Rasiya re man basiya re

Pardesi was codirected by Abbas and Vasili Pronin, produced jointly by the state-owned Mosfilm studio and Abbas's Naya Sansar, in both Hindustani and Russian versions. ↩️

10. Music from *Dr. Kotnis Ki Amar Kahani*:

Ghulami Nahin Tu Josh Mein Aa

Dekho Mauj Bahar



Pardesi Re

↩️

11. The WPC was the major vehicle for Soviet-backed internationalism during the early years of the Cold War. Thus for the PWA and CPI it was the major vehicle prior to AAPSO and the AAWA through which they participated in the international solidarity of the global south. See Jeremy Friedman, *The Shadow Cold War: The Sino-Soviet Competition for the Third World* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2015); Carolien Stolte and Su Lin Lewis, "Other Bandungs: Afro-Asian Internationalisms in the Early Cold War," *Journal of World History* 30, no. 1–2) (2019): 1–19; US State Department Foreign Affairs Note, "The World Peace Council's Peace Assemblies," May 1983. After 1962, the Indo-Chinese and Indo-Soviet split created a rift in the international and Indian left, with the CPI splitting into pro-Moscow and pro-Beijing (which also mapped onto more establishment and more militant) parties. The slogan now began to appear as "Hindi-Cheeni Bye Bye" (or even later, "Hindi-Cheeni Buy Buy"). Siddharth Bhatia, "From Hindi-Chini Bhai-Bhai to Bye-Bye, and now Buy-Buy," *Wire,* May 15, 2015, https://thewire.in/culture/bollywood-from-hindi-chini-bhai-bhai-to-bye-bye-and-now-buy-buy < https://thewire.in/culture/bollywood-from-hindi-chini-bhai-bhai-to-bye-bye-and-now-buy-buy> . Nowadays, flare-ups of Indian-Chinese military tension or economic rivalry evince nationalist pride bristling with competitiveness, not cooperativeness. ↩️

12. "China calls out: I am Asia's salvation / Outwardly I am just a country, but in reality, I am a whole universe. / I am the utterance of Mao's lips, which came out of Stalin's heart. / Whose charming tale is becoming ever-lengthy / A storm approaches the world."

"Pukaarkar Cheen kah raha hai ki Asia ki nijaat hun mai

Bazahir ek mulk hun haqqeqat me lekin ek kainaat hun mai

Jo {Stalin} ked il se nikali voh Mao ke lab ki bat hun mai

Voh bat jis ka huseen afsana tavil hota hi ja raha hai.

Jahan men tufaan a raha hai" ↩

13. Some Asian geographies: On the Silk Road as world-organizer, see Peter Frankopan, *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World* (New York: Vintage, 2017); *The New Silk Roads: The New Asia and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York: Vintage, 2020). James Scott's Zomia, described in *The Art of Not Being Governed* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), constructs the Asian inner highlands as a zone perennially exceeding the grasp of state power centers, from Burma to Afghanistan. Gaurav Desai and Isabel Hofmeyr link Afrasia across the web of the Indian Ocean. K.N. Chaudhuri's work on the Indian Ocean world is classic: *Asia Before Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); *Trade and Civilization in the Indian Ocean* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). Sunil Amrith weaves links through waters including the Bay of Bengal, in *Crossing the Bay of Bengal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), and all the Himalayan-originating watersheds in *Unruly Waters* (New York: Basic Books, 2018). Leila Fawaz, C.A. Bayly, Susan Bayly, Sugata Bose, et al. link South Asia and the Middle East across the Persian Gulf, in *Modernity and Culture, from the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean*, ed. Leila Fawaz and C. A. Bayly (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002). ↩

14. "Ploughs now move in the fields of time and history; / Sword blades bear fruit in tree branches; / Drums begin to sound in the wind as soon as one takes a breath; / O mercy! The expanse of the angry, rebellious air! / Get out of Asia!"
"chal rahe hain vaqt aur tarikh ke kheton me hal / phal rahe hain per ki shaakkon men talvaron ke phal / saaans lete hai baj uthte hain havaon men {ruhal} / maala maal bigri hui sarkush fizaaon ka tanao / Asia se bhaag jao." ↩

15. "Earth is immortal, / Wind is immortal, / Water is immortal, / Immortal is the throbbing of peoples' hearts / Which seeks the open spaces of the sky. / People do not die; they go to sleep, hiding their faces in the earth's golden soil, / Laying their head against the golden bosom of their mother, / They see the dreams of spring."
"Zamin amar hai / Hava amar hai / Amar hai pani / Amar awami dilon ki dharkan / Jo asman ki khuli fizaon ko dhoond rahti hai / Awaam murti nahin hai; so jate hai, zamin ki sonahri mitthi me munh chipakar / voh apni maa ki sonahri chhaati se sir lagaakar, bahaar ke khwaab dekhte hai." ↩

16. See Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: A History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1997). ↩

17. "The roads once closed with imperialist stumbling-blocks are now open; / From the lips fly kisses of faith; from the eyes, glances of love; / The arms of Nanking are now the

garland around the neck of beautiful Samarkand; / And Bukhara restlessly embraces Peking."
"Jo band the samraji rodon se khul gaen aa kharsh voh raahen / labon se bu se urhe aaqidet ke, aankh se pyaar ki nigaahen / haseen Samarqand ke gale ka hai har, ab Nankin ki {bahnen} / Bukhara betab hokar Peking ko gale se laga raha hai." ↩

18. Compare Chen Kuan-Hsing's articulation of Inter-Asian cultural studies as a project of "contribut{ing} to the integration of an imagined Asia at the level of knowledge production," and its tasks, with each country and region no longer siloed in its own westward focus,
to build a platform for an 'Inter-Asia' intellectual community by creating links between and across local circles . . . . as part of a larger Asian intellectual movement . . . . Given our recognition that there is no cultural and/or historical unity, but in fact very significant regional and sub-regional difference throughout "Asia," including the effects of globalization on regionalization, there is an urgent demand to move beyond nation-state boundaries to intersect the regional and sub-regional" both within Asian and between Asia and globally.
Chen Kuan-Hsing, ed., *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies Reader* (Abingdon-on-Thames: Routledge, 2007), 1–2. For a critical intervention in the habitual category of Asia as a unified category of study, identity, or political idea, see Gayatri Spivak, *Other Asias* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley-Blackwell, 2007). ↩

19. Later, Urdu literary critic Aijaz Ahmad challenged cultural theorist Fredric Jameson's characterization of all Third World literature as nationalist literature, suggesting the alternative of a progressive socialist literature of the global south that was not nationalist but still collective; another way to be not the individualistic stance of the modernists contemporary to the Progressive Writers, or the postmodernists of Jameson's time. Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 2008). ↩

20. For Rashed as interpreted by Pue, it is the latter but not the former, to which he contrasts Jafri. Drawing on Spivak, Pue speaks of Asia and Asianness as "a position, not an identity," meaning a definition based in historical and political locatedness, not in any particular inherent content. Pue, "Ephemeral Asia," 82. ↩

21. "Rise, O rise up, Asia's sons; / Descend from the mountain peaks; / Emerge from the depths of the earth; / Leave the wheels of the mills and come upon this road / Where, under the cool shade of a red banner, I am singing; / Let the siren of the mills shriek; / The ships' whistles and engines are sounding— / Let them, for it's the time of insurrection; / Rush from the valleys with storm strength . . . . . / Hear, O hear, my brothers! Yes, you . . ." {How's that for interpellation?}

"Utho, utho, Asia ki beto / pahaar ki chotion se utaro / zamin ki gehraion se nikalo / milon ke pahion ko chorkar is sarak pe ao / jahan me ek surkh rang jhande ke thande saare ga raha hun/milon ke {bhompon} ko {chikhne} do/jahaaz { }ke sitiaan baj rahi hai, bajne bhi do, ki vaqt-e-sarkashi hai / jhapat parho vadion se tufaan ki zor bankar /. . . suno, suno, mere bhai, haan, tum . . ." ↩

22. *Lotus,* a.k.a. *Afro-Asian Writings*, was the journal put out by the AAWA; several PWA members were among its editorial committee. See Hala Halim, "*Lotus*, the Afro-Asian Nexus and Global South Comparatism," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 32, no. 3 (2012): 563–583. https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1891570 < https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-1891570> ; Duncan Yoon, "'Our Forces Have Redoubled': World Literature, Postcolonialism, and the Afro-Asian Writers' Bureau," *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry* < https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/cambridge-journal-of-postcolonial-literary-inquiry> 2, no. 2 (September 2015): 233–252, https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.11 < https://doi.org/10.1017/pli.2015.11> ; Nida Ghouse, *Lotus* Notes, *ARTMargins* 5, no. 3 (2016): 82–91; Ramnath, "Lotus Positions," in *Forms of the Left in Colonial South Asia*, ed. Sanjukta Sunderasan and Lotte Hoek (London: Bloomsbury, 2021). ↩

23. "Somewhere you built victory arches /. . . . / Somewhere you made stone statues. / But these souvenirs of "Culture and Civilisation" are nowhere. / Summon your painters and sculptors; / Tell them to adorn each and every museum with these sorrowful faces / And make immortal your great achievement."
"Kahin pe mehrab fatih baandhi /. . . . / kahin pe patthar ke but banae / magar yeh "tehzib aur tamadun" ki yaadgaaren kahin nahin hain / bulaon apne masvaron aur butgaron ko / kaho ke un dardnaak cheheron ke ek ek museum sajaaden / tumhare kaar-e-azim ko jadu bana den. ↩

24. A fine-grained depiction of any Asian region's particularities, internal contradictions, local power structures and hierarchies this is not. Jafri also does not mention caste, in the Hindu imagery he does deploy. This is consistent with Indian communism's history of recognizing only class, not caste, as a primary structural category. ↩

25. He recalls to us Mount Alamut—mountain fortress of the Crusader-era Assassins, legendary as militarily impregnable while sheltering gorgeous gardens and intellectual life, theology and science, a famed library (and an Ismaili stronghold). He recalls al-Muqanna, a "washerman" or dyer who in the eighth century claimed to be a prophet, fusing Islam and Zoroastrianism, involved in an uprising of Persians against Arabs (Abbasids), as the "Veiled Prophet" attributed with magical powers. In the Western Ghats too (Sahyadri, in Maharashtra, fortified like Alamut), Jafri renders hills as cannons, rocks as fortresses, peasants as a flood. He recalls to us Khushal Khan Khattak "whose every word is a battle song," who advocated Pashto unity and fought the Mughals from Afghanistan; he calls on Afridis, Mahmands, Shinwaris. Time might forget Aurangzeb, he says, but in every century will rise a rebel-poet like that from the Khyber valley, which is blessed to have birthed such a one. ↩

26. Here reprising the same color-words as in the opening: black, brown, white and yellow imperialist invaders; black, yellow, white and brown communist workers. ↩

27. "Separate, nevertheless we are one, the inhabitants of one earth; / We are the settlers of one earth, believers in one humanity; / There is neither a West nor an East. / The earth takes the mirror of the sun and dances; / Life sings the songs of peoples' victory."
"Alag alag, phir bhi ek hain ek ek dharti ke rahnevale / ham dharti ke basnevale ek insaaniyat ke qaail / na koi purab hai aur pashchim / zamin suraj ka aina naachti hai / hayat insaan ke jeet ke geet ga rahi hai" ↩

28. Duncan Yoon writes how in the American context, Afro-Asian solidarity in the 1960s–1970s entailed the Black Panthers calling on Chinese-Americans to be more Maoist, as opposed to aspiring to assimilate to the mainstream. The Chinese-American radical group I Wor Kuen represented the view compatible with the Panthers: they were internationalist, anti-imperialist, militant. Yoon, "Our Forces Have Redoubled." See, again, Friedman, *Shadow Cold War*; also Bill Mullen, *Afro-Orientalism* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2004); Fred Ho and Bill Mullen, eds., *Afro Asia* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008). ↩

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Burley (AK Press, 2022); and “Lotus Roots: Transposing a Political-Aesthetic Agenda from South Asia to Afro-Asia” in *Forms of the Left in South Asia: Aesthetics, Networks and Connected Histories*, ed. Lotte Hoek & Sanjukta Sunderasan (Bloomsbury Press, 2022).

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Anti-Colonial Defeat: The 1967 Naksa and Its Consequences

by Dahlia El Zein | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Towards Third Worlding

ABSTRACT This entry asks what it means to mourn the loss of the state as a vehicle for revolutionary liberation. State power was indeed authoritarian, and global solidarity in the era of the Third World Movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was superfluous, but it still meant something to people then and now. Losing it was felt. In this piece, I revisit the 1967 Arab defeat against Israel known as al-Naksa (the resounding setback) within the context of the Third World movement and its influence on global solidarity in the ensuing decades following 1967. I focus on the loss of Egypt's position as an anti-colonial leader after the 1967 war and subsequent death of Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1970. Egypt, once a bastion of revolutionary anti-colonial fervor at the nexus of Pan-Arab and Pan-African imaginaries, and a hub of the historic Third World, became radically realigned with the Global North under Anwar Sadat. I argue that the fate of the Egyptians, Palestinians, Arabs, and of anti-colonial global struggle each became unlinked and siloed as individual struggles. It is not just Arabs or Egyptians or Palestinians who were defeated, it was a whole anti-colonial ethos. How do we mourn the loss of the state as a vehicle for liberation, for Palestinians, for Arabs, for Africans, and for the post-colony?

KEYWORDS Algeria, Egypt, MENA, Palestine, Third World, anti-colonial, solidarity

During the FIFA Arab World Cup 2021 in Qatar, the Algerian team won its quarter-final match against Morocco and the players celebrated by covering themselves with the Palestinian flag. Algeria went on to win the cup and the team's coach dedicated it to the people of Palestine. Images of the Algerian team donning the Palestinian flag ignited social media with scores of people posting comments of praise including Palestinian politician, scholar, and activist Hanan Ashrawi who

tweeted, “The honorable Algeria! They know what it means to live under a settler colonial regime & they know how to resist & liberate themselves!”

Figure 1. Post by Hanan Ashrawi on X, formerly known as Twitter, December 11, 2021.

Ashrawi is drawing upon a rich history of Algeria that as a historian I often encounter in the archive, an Algeria at the helm of global anti-colonial struggle during the height of the Third World movement. The settler colonialism she refers to is the French colonization of Algeria which began in 1830 and ended after the eight-year bloody Algerian War of Independence (1954–1962) costing millions of

lives.[1] This was the Algeria of Frantz Fanon's revolution, an Algeria that hosted the Palestine Liberation Organization, the Black Panther Party, and several other anti-colonial organizations in the 1960s and early 1970s from across the globe.[2] Algeria became a hub for what became known as the Third World movement or sometimes referred to as Third Worldism or Third World internationalism after the Bandung Conference of 1955.[3] The Third World, contrary to popular belief, was meant to denote a third way and didn't have the contemporary pejorative connotation of "backward people and places." In fact, the foundation of modern area studies (Middle East studies, Slavic studies, Latin American studies etc.) in the US and British academy was a reaction to curb Soviet influence on the "Third World." The Third World of the early Cold War period was not "recessive" countries considered as undesirable backwaters but rather highly desirable contested spaces of decolonization.[4]

In the Middle East and North Africa, perhaps the only place that rivaled Algeria as a revolutionary hub was the Egypt of Gamal Abdel Nasser with his signature phrase "*La Sharqiyya, la gharbiyya*," neither East nor West. Nasser was as much a symbol of anti-colonial struggle as he was an icon for Arab nationalism. And for Nasser's Egypt as it was for Algeria, the Black Panther Party, Cuba, and the rest of the Third World during the 1950s and 1960s, the question of Palestine was paramount. Palestine, rhetorically at least, became the beating heart of the Third World movement as a historical project of liberation from imperialism and settler colonialism. From Gamal Abdel Nasser to Huey Newton, the dispossession of Palestinians, the establishment of the State of Israel as a settler colonial state on Palestinian land in 1948 known as *al-Nakba* (the catastrophe) and the ongoing dispossession that ensued during an era of decolonization became a rallying cry of global anti-colonial revolutionary struggle that linked Algeria, Palestine, Black liberation, and Pan-Africanism across the world.

If the moniker of the Third World was an anti-imperialist state, Egypt and Algeria arguably failed the litmus test, both with aspirational imperialist tendencies.

Egypt, as Eve Troutt Powell argues, was a "colonized colonizer," colonized by the British on the one hand while colonizing Sudan on the other.[5] Algeria, after its independence, embarked on aggressive Arabization programs designed to all but erase its indigenous Amazigh population.[6] I am not interested in merely resurrecting the nostalgia of this historical moment or simply contrasting it with the state's authoritarianism. The recent forum on "The Third World Historical" in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* provides an excellent framing to understanding the limits of state power and why we need to ask different questions de-centering the state as the only vehicle of holding political community in the Third World to move away from the Westphalian system.[7] I am interested in the affective afterlives of defeat beyond the state and what space those afterlives can hold for Third Worlding.

With the overwhelming attention (rightly so) in scholarship and in the media on the Nakba of 1948, our historical understanding of the role that the war of 1967, known to Arabs as *al-Naksa* (the resounding setback) played in shaping the Third World has been limited. In this piece, I consider what it means to revisit the 1967 *Naksa* within the context of the Third World movement and its influence on global solidarity in the ensuing decades following 1967.[8] I argue that the fate of the Egyptians, the fate of the Palestinians, the fate of other Arabs, and the fate of anti-colonial global struggle each became siloed as individual concerns. Today's calls for relinking global struggles for justice is a legacy of the Third World movement, and I historicize where it dovetails and departs from its antecedent. This contextualization in a moment of the resurgence of global solidarity lexicons allows for a reimagining of an alternative Third Worlding not as separate nation-state projects of decolonization as it once was, but with communities, individuals, and everyday people at its helm linking social, racial, climate, and gender justice underscoring why Third Worlding cannot be a project leaving it open to cooptation and appropriation. But rather, the project must be centered on the processes of learning and unlearning required for an alternative Third Worlding future. A process that allows space for defeat and mourning.

Nasser and History of the Third World Movement

The Non-Alignment Movement, Afro-Asianism, Pan-Arabism, Pan-Africanism, Third Worldism, Third World internationalism, and decolonialization each had their own interlocutors and separate ideologies.[9] As slippery as the concept of the Third World was as a place, as a project, and as an ideology, it was in praxis inextricably linked to anti-colonial struggle. The defining marker of the historical Third World movement of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s was a global solidarity that believed anti-colonial struggles to be linked.

Although there were certainly artists, activists, and individuals involved, the Third World as a historical project with anti-colonial struggle as its ethos was devised and supported by a nascent postcolonial state apparatus across newly independent nation-states. For postcolonial Algeria, Egypt, Indonesia, and Ghana, among many others, it became a state project—a state project built upon authoritarian tendencies, cooptation of anti-colonial and feminist politics, uneven power dynamics between new postcolonial states and their leaders, as well as racist undertones. Many of the figures and names associated with the Third World movement—Nasser, Kwame Nkrumah, Ahmed Ben Bella, Sukarno, Jawaharlal Nehru—were heads of nascent postcolonial states with their own political agendas and were often at odds with each other.

This was certainly the case for Nasser's Egypt. Gamal Abdel Nasser, former President of Egypt and engineer of the Free Officers Coup that overthrew the Egyptian monarchy in 1952, is likely the most studied figure of Egyptian, if not Arab, history writ large.[10] In Egypt and the broader Arab world, he is either remembered as the hero who cared about the poor and instituted a number of socialist programs that actually helped the lives of people or as the father of modern Egyptian authoritarianism and mastermind of the contemporary Egyptian

police state of which current Egyptian President Abd el-Fattah el-Sisi is an inheritor. Nasser became a Third World hero after he boldly and successfully nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956.[11] Britain, France, and Israel tried to invade the canal but were met by global condemnation and were forced to withdraw in utter humiliation.[12]

Third Worldism offered Nasser a convenient platform with wide popular cachet to build out his international persona. Nasser's Egypt moved between several ideological positions depending on convenience and circumstance—a Pan-Arab leader, a Pan-African hub, a socialist haven, an authoritarian chokehold, an anti-colonial hero, a feminist utopia. For instance, Nasser's treatment of Egypt's own Black population, notably the Nubians, and its southern neighbor, the Sudan, exposed the underlying anti-Blackness that shaped Egyptian policies. The racism and condescending attitudes Nasser employed against his so-called African brethren is often swept under the rug. Scholars have written about Nasser's utilitarian view of Pan-Africanism and paternalistic policies towards the Sudan as a "rightful" extension of Egypt.[13] In building the Aswan High Dam, Nasser implemented a mass forced displacement of the Black Nubian population of Upper (southern) Egypt and destruction of their homes.[14] The memory of displacement and dispossession is very much still alive among the Nubian communities in Egypt.

Global solidarity at the state level was no different than the utilitarian nature of the way various agendas were endorsed for state benefit. Between 1956 and 1967, Nasser's Egypt had its hand in many anti-colonial struggles, positioning Egypt not only as the leader of Pan-Arabism but also at the helm of African liberation from European colonialism. It is precisely this placement of Egypt as Arab and African that Nasser capitalized on situating it as the ideal hub for Afro-Asian solidarity. Egypt was a founding member of the Organization for African Unity and Nasser attended its inaugural meeting in Addis Ababa in 1963 with Algeria's Ahmed Ben Bella.[15] The first Afro-Asian People's Solidarity conference was held in Cairo in

January 1958 as shown in the poster below,[16] followed by an Afro-Asian Youth conference later that year and culminating in an Afro-Asian women's solidarity conference in 1961.[17] University education in Egypt was free for any student from anywhere in the Afro-Asian world, offering quotas for countries from Senegal to Indonesia. In the 1959–60 school year, 14,349 students from 57 countries studied in Egypt.[18]

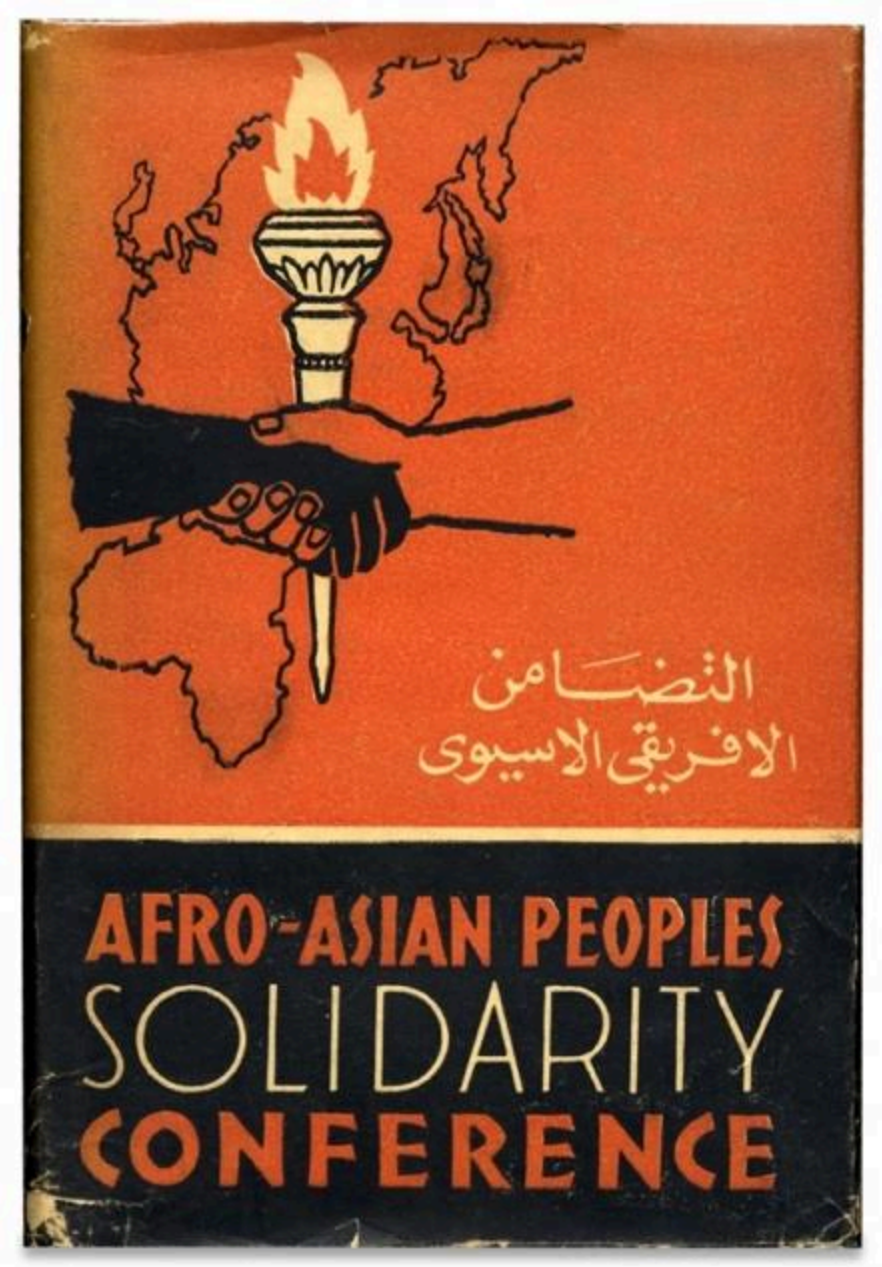
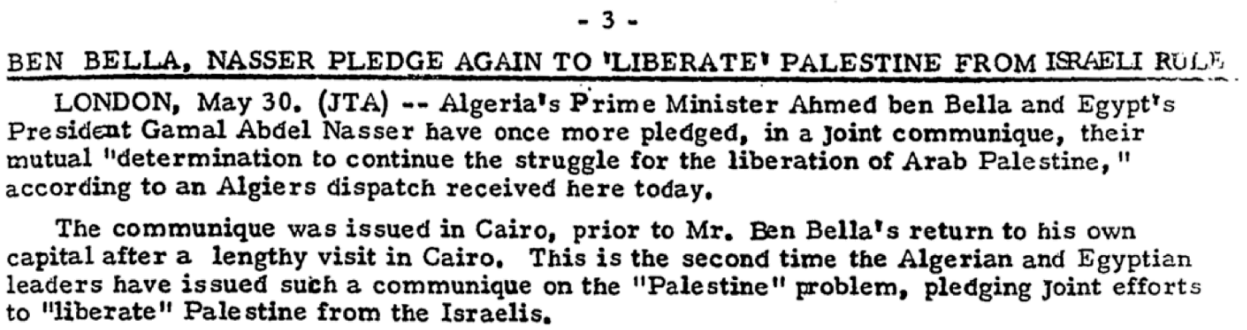


Figure 2. Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Conference poster from *Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference*. Cairo, December 26, 1957–January 1, 1958. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958.

I want to focus on Nasser here because Egypt's trajectory and involvement in the Third World movement and its sharp departure from it after the 1967 war is symbolic of a broader trend in Third Worldism at the time that shifted away from global solidarity towards domestic politics and market forces as soon as things

became difficult exposing the fragile foundations of state power and global solidarity.

Nasser's position towards revolutionary struggle across the Third World (including Algeria, Palestine, Yemen), came with Egyptian military aid provided by Russian weapons. Nasser provided military aid to the Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) during the eight-year Algerian revolutionary war against the French that would see Ben Bella, an FLN member himself (1962–1965), become president of a newly independent Algeria in 1962.[19] The liberation of Palestine was a shared cause between Nasser and Ben Bella. The Jewish Telegraphic Service published a joint letter from Nasser and Ben Bella issued during Ben Bella's visit to Egypt in 1963 confirming Algeria and Egypt's commitment to "liberate Palestine."[20]



- 3 -

BEN BELLA, NASSER PLEDGE AGAIN TO 'LIBERATE' PALESTINE FROM ISRAELI RULE

LONDON, May 30. (JTA) -- Algeria's Prime Minister Ahmed ben Bella and Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser have once more pledged, in a joint communique, their mutual "determination to continue the struggle for the liberation of Arab Palestine," according to an Algiers dispatch received here today.

The communique was issued in Cairo, prior to Mr. Ben Bella's return to his own capital after a lengthy visit in Cairo. This is the second time the Algerian and Egyptian leaders have issued such a communique on the "Palestine" problem, pledging joint efforts to "liberate" Palestine from the Israelis.

Figure 3. From the *Jewish Telegraphic Service* archive, May 31, 1963.

Egypt's stature as a beacon of revolutionary struggle before 1967 was undeniable. For many African American activists involved in anti-colonial struggle, Egypt was seen as the heart of Africa. In a letter to his friend Ethel Minor, Stokley Carmichael, Black Power activist and head of the Student National Coordinating Committee (SNCC) wrote about the 1967 war, "we should include in the propaganda the fact that the Zionists have invaded Egypt [i.e., Sinai]—that Egypt is in Africa and Africa is our motherland and an aggression against the motherland is an aggression against us . . . "[21] This understanding of Egypt as Africa was not

unique to Carmichael, either; Malcolm X, Shirley Graham DuBois, and many other Black Americans had echoed similar sentiments.[22] It should come as no surprise then that the reverberations of the Arab, and especially Egypt's, defeat in the face of Israel in 1967 was felt across the Third World.

Defeat and De-Linking of Global Struggle

The Six Day War of 1967 was an Israeli offensive attack against Egypt, Syria, and Jordan. Within six days Israel had captured and occupied the Sinai Peninsula, Golan Heights, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank and East Jerusalem. Of these territories occupied by Israel in 1967, only the Sinai has been returned to Egypt. The remaining territories of the Syrian Golan Heights, and Palestinian West Bank, East Jerusalem and the Gaza Strip remain under Israeli military occupation.[23] This resounding defeat (al-Naksa) cannot be overstated. Arab governments were humiliated. Nasser, who many saw as provoking the Israelis by closing the Straits of Tiran, had boasted the ability to deliver a crushing Israeli defeat and Arab victory. He emerged the most scarred, even resigning as president (which Egyptians refused) and losing much of his anti-colonial prestige. For Arabs, the defeat was a shock of seismic proportions and for the anti-colonial struggle, it was the beginning of its undoing.

The defeat of 1967 has been written about extensively as an explanation for the political failures and political-economic developments that would unfold across the Arab world. One of which was the rise of Islamic movements and their mass popularity as people started retreating further into religion and away from the secular agenda of a now seemingly defunct Arab nationalism.[24] Many historians of Arab nationalism documented a shift away from *qawmiya* (Arab nationalism) to *wataniya* (individual nationalism i.e., Egyptian nationalism).[25] But the consequences this had on the Third World movement have not been fully

considered or understood. As Egypt retreated inward dealing with the aftermath of the devastation of 1967, many other Arab nations followed suit, cleaning up camp and trying to minimize humiliation in front of their own people. But Egypt's move inwards, as a leader of the Third World Movement, had serious reverberations across the postcolonial world. The anti-colonial activities that Egypt had been heavily involved in during the 1950s and 1960s, whether through Radio Cairo, sending teachers abroad, free university education, organizing solidarity conferences, had suddenly largely come to a halt.[26] Egypt's stature as an Arab and African anti-colonial leader who stood up to the West dissipated.[27] Additionally, the socialist policies that Nasser's regime was known for of free schooling, guaranteed employment, and free daycare facilities became increasingly untenable, and students from the Afro-Asian world no longer looked to Cairo as the locus of anti-colonial pedagogy but rather of colonial defeat. Revolutionary liberation through the state apparatus proved the limits of state power in reversing the dispossession of Palestinians.

When Nasser died suddenly in 1970 (many believe the defeat contributed to his untimely death), Anwar el-Sadat became President and radically redirected Egypt towards the Global North and neoliberal market forces, distancing himself from Nasser's failures, deciding that Egypt needed a peace treaty with Israel for the revitalization of its economy through foreign investment. The nail in the coffin for Pan-Arabism and for its position in the broader anti-colonial struggle was the Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty signed at Camp David in 1978. Sadat had sold out Syria, the Palestinians, Jordan's King Husayn, and the entire anti-colonial agenda for an Egyptian peace treaty with Israel that would secure Western aid money and investments for Egypt.[28]

The Arab defeat also brought the rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) and various Palestinian resistance groups, effectively de-linking the Palestinian cause from Pan-Arabism and from worldwide state sponsored anti-colonial struggle at the time. The PLO realized they needed to take matters into

their own hands and could not rely on other Arab states such as Egypt for liberation. But this effectively de-linked the Palestinian struggle from Egypt, from other Arabs, and from the broader Third World. And without the backing of a political giant like Egypt and Nasser, support for Palestinian liberation came primarily from other anti-colonial revolutionary groups such as the Black Panther Party (BPP) in the United States, which would by the mid-1970s focus on internal politics.[29] Defeat of the Arab states provided the impetus for the strengthening of political organizations and civil society groups to lead the revolutionary vanguard against Israeli occupation and state oppression of Palestinians.

At first, after the 1967 defeat, Black power activists in the United States became more vocal of their support of Palestinians especially with the establishment of an international office in Algeria in 1970 where the PLO was also being housed at the time. Michael Fischbach in *Black Power and Palestine* highlights a postcolonial Third World vision that brought Black Americans, Palestinians, and Arabs together in anti-colonial struggle connecting solidarities across the Atlantic between African Americans and Arabs. Fischbach argues that the 1967 war was a turning point in creating a rift between mainstream African American civil rights organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Black Power groups.[30] After the Naksa, Black Power activists like Carmichael and Eldridge Cleaver came out more vocally in support of the Palestinians, while Jewish Americans put immense pressure on more mainstream civil rights leaders including Martin Luther King Jr. to show support for Israel. After BPP leader Huey Newton was released from two years in prison in 1970, his position on Palestine changed. He started walking back previous BPP comments against Israel, which triggered the famous split between Newton and Cleaver, who was in Algeria. The rift was fueled by the FBI's COINTELPRO misinformation program to inflame factionalism within the BPP. Newton wanted to focus on domestic concerns and work within the system, while Cleaver wanted to continue his commitment to revolutionary anti-colonial struggle. By 1974, the revolutionary arm of the BPP was in decline as was its pro-revolutionary anti-

colonial Palestinian stance, and Newton's emphasis on domestic politics won out.[31] The PLO too became mired in factionalism, targeted assassinations, and forced to negotiate with state power, moving from Cairo to Jordan to Lebanon and then to Algeria and Tunis. Egypt by 1974 was firmly under Sadat's control who radically redirected Egypt away from its previous anti-colonial agenda and chiefly focused on Egyptian domestic policy.[32]

Losing Egypt on the international stage, as an African, Arab, Asian symbol of anti-imperialism was a monumental loss for the Third World and has not subsequently been understood. Bandung, decolonization, and the lexicon of the Third World movement as a historical struggle against colonialism recast as the "Global South" has been resurrected in the academy and in activist circles during the past several years.[33] However, the association of the Third World as synonymous with global anti-colonial solidarity was a short-lived historical moment that became overshadowed by many decades of individual nation-state politics and replaced by neoliberal market economics in much of the world. Egypt and Algeria today as nation-states couldn't be further from the bastions of revolution and anti-imperial liberation they once stood for. It is not just Arabs or Egyptians or Palestinians who were defeated, it is a whole anti-colonial ethos. The fate of the Arabs, fate of the Palestinians, and fate of anti-colonial global struggle each became siloed as individual concerns over internal domestic politics and market concerns.[34] All this anti-colonial energy that had been building up in Africa and the Middle East, deflated slowly over the next several years after the Naksa, exposing the uneven and shaky foundations it had been built upon. The Naksa was certainly not the only reason for the steady decline of global anti-colonial solidarities, but it needs serious further exploration especially if we are to reimagine an alternate Third Worlding for our time with individuals, reimagined institutions, and communities, not states, at the helm.

Rather than provide a hard definition for what Third Worlding should look like, my entry, like others in this forum, offers an opening to think about how we, as a

collective of well-intentioned allies who believe in the Third World's calling, can rebuild the foundations of global solidarity. If we imagine "Third Worlding" as a process of learning and unlearning, and the Global South as the place (figuratively and geographically) for that process—what would it mean to remove the state from the history of the Third World and reimagine its foundations from its roots, grappling with defeat as a necessary part of that process? What would it mean to sit with the loss of the state as a vehicle for revolutionary liberation, for Palestinians, for Arabs, for Africans, and for the post-colony?

The affective daily lives of Palestinians in Israel and the Palestinian Occupied Territories has worsened as the discourse for global solidarity with Palestine is arguably at its highest since pre-1967.[35] To (un)learn from the way the Third World has been positioned within a materialist discourse around the centrality of state power, the Third World cannot be a project as it once was.[36] State power was indeed authoritarian and global solidarity in that era was superfluous, but it still *meant* something to people then and now. Losing it was *felt*. Its loss provided for alternative paths to revolutionary struggle (the PLO, the BPP) but they were still tied to the state. The Naksa was not only a defeat for the state (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon) but it was embodied by virtually every person in the Arab world and beyond. The feeling of loss has been inherited by successive generations whose parents and grandparents had at once lived the hope for liberation and the subsequent humiliation and hopelessness.[37] We have not properly mourned what could have been (the process of unlearning). The state as a tool for liberation was defeated. The liberation for Palestine and Palestinians therefore cannot come from the state project because the state failed the postcolonial condition in every way. And that is a loss worth mourning.

Notes

1. For more on the Algerian Revolution, see Ghania Mouffok, "Djamila Bouhired: Algerian Women Between Glory and Contempt <

https://assafirarabi.com/en/42861/2022/01/10/djamila-bouhired-algerian-women-between-glory-and-contempt/> ," *As-Safir*, January 10, 2022.

2. Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism* (New York: Grove Press, 1965).

3. Throughout this essay, I refer to the movement as the Third World movement. For more on Bandung, see Biodun Jeyifo, "Inside and Outside the Whale: 'Bandung,' 'Rwanda,' Postcolonial Studies," paper presented at the "Revolution 13/13" conference, Columbia University, New York, September 22, 2021, http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/revolution1313/files/2021/09/Inside-and-Outside-the-Whale.pdf < http://blogs.law.columbia.edu/revolution1313/files/2021/09/Inside-and-Outside-the-Whale.pdf> .

4. For more on the history of Area Studies see Hossein Khosrowjah, "A Brief History of Area Studies and International Studies," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 33, no. 3/4 (2011), https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858661 < https://www.jstor.org/stable/41858661> .

5. Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

6. For more on the Arabization campaigns in Algeria, see Kheireddine Bekkai, "The Hijacking of Algerian Identity," *Journal of Middle Eastern Politics and Policy*, October 25, 2015, https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2015/10/25/hijacking-algerian-identity/ < https://jmepp.hkspublications.org/2015/10/25/hijacking-algerian-identity/> ; and Yacine Boudhane, "What Have the Amazigh Achieved in Algeria?" *Fikra Forum*, October 27, 2017, https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-have-amazigh-achieved-algeria < https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/what-have-amazigh-achieved-algeria> . I don't focus on Morocco in this piece, but it is pertinent to note that it is occupying the Western Sahara. See, for example, Carne Ross and Anthony Jean, "Life in Africa's Last Colony," New Republic, April 24, 2017, https://newrepublic.com/article/141698/africas-last-colony-western-sahara-photo-essay.

7. Elleni Centime Zeleke and Arash Davari, "Introduction: Third World Historical: Rethinking Revolution from Ethiopia to Iran," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (August 1, 2022): 422–429, https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-9987905 < https://doi.org/10.1215/1089201X-9987905> .

8. I would like to thank Forum editors Rayya El Zein and Malav Kanuga for offering productive conversations, comments, and invaluable insights that have only made this piece better.

9. For a good explanation of the differences between these terms, see Jeffrey James Byrne, *Mecca of Revolution: Algeria, Decolonization, and the Third World Order* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

10. The historiography of Gamal Abdel Nasser is too numerous to recall here. But a small sampling includes Shirley Graham Du Bois, *Gamal Abdel Nasser, Son of the Nile: A*

Biography (New York: The Third Press, 1972); Saïd K. Aburish, *Nasser: The Last Arab* (New York: St. Martin's Press/Thomas Dunne Books, 2004); Omar Khalifah, *Nasser In the Egyptian Imaginary* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

11. For more on the Suez Canal War and Nasser's rise after it, see Charles D. Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict,* 8th ed. (Boston, MA: Bedford/St. Martins, 2013); Guy Laron, *Origins of the Suez Crisis: Postwar Development Diplomacy and the Struggle Over Third World Industrialization, 1945–1956* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2013).

12. See Gamal Abdel Nasser's speech famous speech after the 1956 Suez War: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gd8xHBQTF4 < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6gd8xHBQTF4> .

13. Gamal Abdel Nasser, *The Philosophy of the Revolution* (Buffalo, NY: Smith, Keynes & Marshall, 1959), 230. For Egypt's relationship with Sudan, see Eve Troutt Powell, *A Different Shade of Colonialism: Egypt, Great Britain, and the Mastery of the Sudan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

14. Nubian Geographic, "Taking the High Dam," from "Leil Zahra Mortada: There is Baba in Our House," Center for Human Rights and the Arts, https://chra.bard.edu/commission/mortada/?fbclid=IwAR18JF6IVwz0n1GexlSyLmjCjmib83zBEun3LFFGjPLyAwiIr1VWko76rUs < https://chra.bard.edu/commission/mortada/?fbclid=IwAR18JF6IVwz0n1GexlSyLmjCjmib83zBEun3LFFGjPLyAwiIr1VWko76rUs> .

15. "Nine African Countries Undertake Facing the Battle to End Colonialism in Africa" *Al-Ahram* (Cairo, Egypt), May 28, 1963.

16. Afro-Asian Peoples Solidarity Conference poster, *Afro-Asian Peoples' Solidarity Conference*, Cairo, December 26, 1957–January 1, 1958 (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1958).

17. *The First Afro-Asian Women's Conference, Cairo, 14–23 January 1961: Reports, Messages, Speeches, Resolutions* (Cairo, Amalgamated Press of Egypt, 1961), 10.

18. Amir Boktor, *The Development and Expansion of Education in the United Arab Republic* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1963), 13.

19. Fathi al-Deeb, *Abd al-Nasser wa al-Thawra al-Jazairiya* (Nasser and the Algerian Revolution) (Cairo: Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, 1990).

20. "Ben Bella, Nasser Pledge Again to 'Liberate' Palestine from Israeli Rule," *Jewish Telegraphic Service* archive, May 31, 1963.

21. Michael Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine: Transnational Countries of Color* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2018), 47–48.

22. Shirley Graham DuBois, "Egypt is Africa (1 of 2 Parts)," *Black Scholar* 1, no. 7 (1970): 20–27.

23. The West Bank, Gaza, and East Jerusalem are referred to today as the Palestinian Occupied Territories. For more on the Six Day War see Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*; Rashid Khalidi, *The Hundred Years' War On Palestine: A History of Settler Colonialism and Resistance, 1917–2017* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2020). ↩

24. See Abdullah A Al-Arian, *Answering the Call : Popular Islamic Activism In Egypt (1968–1981)* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Ibrahim Abu Rabi, *Contemporary Arab Thought: Studies In Post-1967 Arab Intellectual History* (London: Pluto Press, 2004); Fadi Bardawil, *Revolution and Disenchantment: Arab Marxism and the Binds of Emancipation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020). ↩

25. Adeed Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism In the Twentieth Century: From Triumph to Despair* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 257. ↩

26. See James R. Brennan, "Radio Cairo and the Decolonization of East Africa, 1953-64," in *Making a World After Empire: The Bandung Moment and Its Political Afterlives*, ed. Christopher J. Lee (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2010). ↩

27. Omar Dahi, "1967 and Third Worldism," Roundtables: 1967 Defeat, Middle East Studies Pedagogy Initiative, https://mespi.org/2018/06/05/on-history-and-temporality-omar-dahi-muriam-haleh-davis-and-maya-mikdashi/. ↩

28. Dawisha, *Arab Nationalism*, 268; Smith, *Palestine and the Arab-Israeli Conflict*, 353–355. ↩

29. The PLO posed a threat to King Husayn of Jordan who would expel them by attacking refugee camps in Black September 1970. The Black Panther Party posed a threat to the US government who worked to undermine the party with the FBI's COINTELPRO program of spreading misinformation in the party and assassinating party leaders like Fred Hampton. ↩

30. Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 50. ↩

31. Fischbach, *Black Power and Palestine*, 123. ↩

32. See Hisham Aidi, "Egypt and the Afrocentrists: The Latest Round", *Africa Is a Country*, March 23, 2022, https://africasacountry.com/2022/03/egypt-and-the-afrocentrists-the-latest-round. ↩

33. Siba Grovogui, "A Revolution Nonetheless: The Global South in International Relations," *Global South* 5, no.1 (2011): 175, https://doi.org/10.2979/globalsouth.5.1.175. ↩

34. Zeleke and Davari, "Introduction: Third World Historical." ↩

35. As of September, 2023 was already the deadliest year on record for Palestinians in the West Bank, including children. "2023 marks deadliest year on record for children in the occupied West Bank," *ReliefWeb*, September 18, 2023, https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/2023-marks-deadliest-year-record-children-occupied-west-bank < https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-

palestinian-territory/2023-marks-deadliest-year-record-children-occupied-west-bank> . Since October 7, 2023, over 15,000 Palestinians have been killed in the Gaza Strip including at least 6,000 children, 239 Palestinians have been killed in the West Bank, and 1,200 Israelis have been killed as of November 26, 2023, "Israeli forces carry out deadly raids in the West Bank amid Gaza truce," *Al Jazeera English*, November 26, 2023, https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/26/israeli-forces-carry-out-deadly-raids-in-the-west-bank-amid-gaza-truce < https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/11/26/israeli-forces-carry-out-deadly-raids-in-the-west-bank-amid-gaza-truce> . On November 13, 2023, *The Washington Post* reported that one out of every 200 people had been killed in Gaza, Ruby Mellen, Artur Galocha and Júlia Ledur, "Gaza reports more than 11,100 killed. That's one out of every 200 people," *The Washington Post*, November 13, 2023, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/gaza-rising-death-toll-civilians/ < https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2023/gaza-rising-death-toll-civilians/> . On Palestinians citizens in Israel, see: Jaclyn Diaz and Lauren Frayer, "Palestinians in Israel cite threats, firings and discrimination after Oct. 7,"*NPR News*, November 21, 2023, https://www.npr.org/2023/11/21/1213892449/palestinians-israel-war-discrimination-censorship. < https://www.npr.org/2023/11/21/1213892449/palestinians-israel-war-discrimination-censorship> ↩

36. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, Sohail Daulatzai, Arash Davari, Mamadou Diallo, Bouchra Khalili, and Elleni Centime Zeleke, "Revolution and Rehearsal in the Global South: Unlearning the Archive," *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 42, no. 2 (August 1, 2022): 517–530. Azoulay writes,

    Unlearning is a necessity and should be taken very seriously, since the technology of the archive operates through us, defining who we are, how we act and interact with others, and our possibilities—or lack thereof—to care for the shared world. The technology of the archive makes us believe that the past exists. The institution of the archive is the site where this invented past is being materialized. ↩

37. Ismail Nashif discusses the impact of the 1967 war on children's literature and how it communicated a psychology of defeat to the generation born post-1967. Ismail Nashif, *Tufuwlat Haziran:Dar al-Fata al-Araby w Adab al-Ma'sa* (June's Childhood: Dar al Fata al Araby and the literature of tragedy) (Ramallah: Tamer Institute, 2016). ↩

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Let’s Relax!

by Andrew Culp, Hui Peng, Leigh Jackson, Hannah Simpson and Patrick McKelvey | Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023), Positions

ABSTRACT Andrew Culp and the Cultural Studies Association’s Performance Working Group Co-Chair Hui Peng discuss “relaxed performance” with Leigh Jackson, Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at People's Light outside of Philadelphia, and Dr. Hannah Simpson, Lecturer at the University of Edinburgh and author of *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* (Palgrave, 2022). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Patrick McKelvey.

KEYWORDS ableism, disability, performance, theatre

Positions, Episode 2

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Let’s Relax!

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Commentary

By Patrick McKelvey

In her *Keywords for Disability Studies* entry, disability historian Bess Williamson introduces one definition of access as "the ability to enter into, move about within, and operate the facilities of a site."[1] For Williamson, this account of access is necessarily provisional, grounded as it is in mid-century understandings of the relationship between the body and the built environment. And she complicates this definition, including its historical, cultural, and ideological contingencies, in the pages that follow. When introducing my students to the subject of access, I

complement the Williamson piece with excerpts from the disability justice collective Sins Invalid's *Skin, Tooth, and Bone*, writings with a radical understanding of access as a collective political and aesthetic project that in many respects diverges from the liberal itineraries animating this "literal" understanding of access.[2] But part of what I love about the (admittedly limited) initial definition Williamson introduces is how it highlights the materiality of access, a materiality that often disappears in contemporary invocations of access as a self-evident good abstracted from systems of material support. It highlights, then, how access is insufficiently realized if one is only ever brought "into contact with someone or something"—access also requires making use of that with which one comes into contact.[3] With due apologies for the productivist tenor of this instrumental focus on utility—an aspiration of many genealogies of accessible design that have been rightly and thoroughly critiqued by disability theorist Aimi Hamraie among others—the student theatre makers I teach routinely find promise in this orientation to access, recognizing an imperative not only to get disabled audiences in seats and disabled artists on and off-stage, but also to create the conditions in which they can make use of their encounters with theatrical practice.[4]

This episode of *Positions* features a collective conversation about a specific development in the history of making theatre useful for disabled spectators. The panelists, cohosts Andrew Culp and Hui Peng, in conversation with guests Dr. Hannah Simpson (a leading disability performance theorist and author of the recent *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*) and Leigh Jackson (Director of Accessibility & EDI Programming at Philadelphia's People's Light and Theatre Company) focus on "relaxed performance," an access practice geared at cultivating environments in which the constraints of ableist spectatorial norms are at least tempered—or "loosened," in Peng's figuration.[5] Typically targeted at neurodivergent spectators in particular, relaxed conventions—such as raised house lights and permission to move and vocalize—challenge compulsory stillness and silence as conditions for engaged (and "polite") spectatorship.

These abled, classed, and racialized norms, *Positions* reminds us, are not timeless imperatives, but historically and culturally specific—norms that Simpson frames as consolidating in the United Kingdom following World War II. These norms, the panelists demonstrate, have proved incompatible with the needs of people with a diverse range of bodyminds. Behaviors that otherwise might have been regarded as benign (or even *desirable*) variations upon the forms of spectatorial corporeality to which we have become habituated, practices through which neurodivergent spectators engage—make use—of their collective theatrical presence, instead become dismissed, even pathologized, as disruptive and distracting.

Positions reviews not only what relaxed performance can look and whose access needs can be served through this practice, but the diverse institutional, aesthetic, and national contexts through which this access practice has traveled, and the conventions that have consolidated as a result. In addition to discussing an initiative among West End theatres in the early 2010s that inspired much work in this area, the panelists address how relaxed performances have taken shape in regional theatres in the United States; they discuss approaches to relaxed performance by disability culture artists like Jess Thom (Touretteshero, a significant figure in Simpson's recent book); and they provide glimpses of Peng's current research on how relaxed performance has taken shape in Hong Kong. In some instances, this attention to institutional context situates relaxed performance within a broader ecology of access practices, such as ASL interpretation and captioning at People's Light, and Thom's deployment of "access aesthetics," which is Graeae Theatre Company Artistic Director Jenny Sealey's term for modes of theatrical production in which access is a central commitment—and an aesthetically generative one—rather than a begrudging acquiescence in the name of compliance.[6] In addition to the generous and useful orientation to relaxed performance that the episode provides, I was struck by three recurrent threads that track across the conversation: the question of the proper subject of relaxed performance, the austerity of access, and labor.

First, there are several moments throughout the episode that touch on the question of the proper subject of relaxed performance (or perhaps the proper consumer of relaxed resources). While neurodivergent people are often the presumed users of relaxed aesthetics, the episode draws attention to the broad range of spectators whose access needs are met through relaxed conventions, such as caregivers with young children who may need to take advantage of freedom of movement (to cite one of Jackson's examples). In instances such as this, I hear echoes of feminist disability theorist Alison Kafer's "political/relational model of disability," which proposes—in part—that "notions of disability and able-bodiedness affect everyone, not just people with impairments," thus broadening the range of people who are oppressed by ableist institutions, including institutions like modern theatre where spectatorial norms disadvantage a range of people who live *relative* to disability, even if they are themselves not disabled.[7] In one of the episode's most provocative moments, Simpson reveals the radical stakes of this ethos in theatrical contexts, noting the capacity for relaxed performances not only to serve disabled spectators, but to restore embodiment to the theatrical auditorium tout court. As a challenge to compulsory corporeal austerity, relaxed performance, Simpson suggests, has the capacity to make theatre—the collective assembly of representational and spectatorial bodies—more like itself. Without foreclosing upon these generative aesthetic and political possibilities, Simpson simultaneously notes how some varieties of these universalizing impulses might give us pause. "I'm wary of going down that line," Simpson offers, "whereby we only do disability access if it's good for other people, too."

Second, I was struck by a recurrence of ideas that touched on different valences of what I began thinking about as the austerity of access. By this, I mean not only the disinvestment in the arts, disability, and social services that artificially render scarce the resources to realize access, but the aesthetic asceticism that structures which modes and genres of theatrical representation are given to warrant certain access practices to begin with. On this first point, Jackson shared

their experience working in a particular regional theatre production model in which there is a single relaxed performance for each production. They reflected upon the challenges of scheduling that performance at a time when it could serve as many people as possible. Of course, this challenge is compounded by it being an isolated offering, a common access measure among US regional theatres that do provide relaxed performances. This unnecessary austerity of access stands in sharp contrast to the world of disability arts and culture where Thom, as Simpson notes, has advocated for moving toward production models in which relaxed dynamics are the norm and "uptight" performances are offered only on an ad-hoc basis. Moreover, this austerity of access not only inflects what services are offered, but how they are consumed by audiences. To return to my earlier point about how the panelists engage with the complexity of who gets framed as the proper subject of relaxed performance aesthetics, Simpson notes apprehension among (ostensibly neurotypical) audiences about attending relaxed performances due to their "fear of taking up a resource" someone else might need. What we are presented with, then, is something of a vicious circle in which already inadequately resourced access measures risk being incorrectly interpreted as unpopular or undesirable because of the ways audiences have naturalized this logic of access austerity and managed their own spectatorship practices to accommodate scarce access offerings.

But there is yet another valence of austerity I detect in the conversation, one that pertains to the narrowly circumscribed range of theatrical modes, genres, and styles given to be available for, or assigned to, relaxed performance conventions. In this regard, Simpson notes how in the context of the UK, musicals and works for young audiences are among the theatrical fare for which relaxed performances are most frequently available. As a counter to this, Simpson describes Thom's production of Beckett's *Not I*, always performed with relaxed aesthetics, as an experiment seeking to expand the purview of works warranting relaxed offerings, a challenge Simpson (and Thom) locate not only in the difficulty of the work itself, but in the Beckett estate's heavy hand in constraining what is possible in

production. In this framing, Thom's practice in particular, and disability arts and culture more broadly, are offered as anti-austerity measures, challenges not only to the idea that relaxed performance is necessarily the exception to the "uptight" norm, but a refusal of the impoverished sensibility of which theatrical practices variously allow, warrant, or demand relaxed engagement.

Finally, a key thread I detected throughout this conversation concerned labor. Here, I mean not only attention to the infrastructural and artistic labor of access-making that relaxed performance entails (as much for access workers like Jackson, disability artists like Thom, and disability performance scholars like Peng and Simpson), although this was certainly key. At a couple of points in the episode, various panelists reference recent high-profile incidents in which actors have stopped mid-performance to accost spectators for using their cell phones, only to learn later that the alleged violators of theatrical protocols were appropriately using access-oriented apps (that provide audio description or captioning, for instance). While the panelists (rightly) focus on the need for actors and other theatre workers to be better trained on access practices to avoid such misunderstandings, I'm interested in how this these spectacular incidents replay a scenario that always casts (presumptively nondisabled) actors against (presumptively disabled) spectators.

The presumption that the disabled people who participate in theatrical events primarily do so as spectators, rather than actors or other theatre workers, has haunted the implementation of access at theatres and other cultural venues since the passage of Section 504, the civil rights clause of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. In my forthcoming book, *Disability Works*, I trace this dynamic throughout the 1970s and 1980s, a dynamic that has not altogether changed in the twenty-first century United States.[8] Carol J. Gill and Carrie Sandahl's comprehensive 2009 study, "Arts Career Outcomes and Opportunities for Americans with Disabilities," features as a constant refrain that "Access should be incorporated into the planning and implementation of all arts events, not only for audiences but for

artists as well."[9] While this is common practice in disability arts and culture, including the work of artists like Thom, it was with great interest that I heard Jackson move beyond questions of audience to the need for accessible theatrical production practices, including "relaxed" rehearsal spaces, capable of welcoming and supporting the theatrical labor of artists with divergent bodyminds.

Disabled arts workers, and not only disabled audiences—*Positions* ultimately reminds us—need to be at the center of any conversation about expanding who gets to make use of theatrical practice—and how.

Audio Transcript

Andrew Culp: Welcome to *Positions*, The Cultural Studies Association–sponsored podcast published through the open source journal *Lateral*. *Positions* aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics, cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* Journal on socials, and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes. On our second episode, the Performance Studies Working Group of the CSA hosts. Our episode's title is *Let's Relax: Audience Access and Relaxed Performance*.

We are guided by Peng Hui, special guest Leigh Jackson, and myself, Andrew Culp, also are joined by Hannah Simpson to discuss work on relaxed performance, including a recent book by Simpson: *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance* with Palgrave. Enjoy.

Welcome, everyone. I'm Andrew, and I teach at the California Institute of the Arts in the M.A. in Aesthetics and Politics Program, as well as critical studies.

I'm joined here today by Hui, Hannah, and Lee. So let's just begin with some quick introductions. Hui?

Hui Peng: Hi, everybody. I'm Hui, and PhD candidate in theater and performance at Graduate Center, CUNY. I also teach at Hunter College. I'm a co-chair of the Performance Working Group at CSA. I'm very happy to have Lee and Hannah here today to discuss relaxed performance.

Leigh Jackson: Hi, I'm Leigh. I am the Director of Inclusion, Diversity, Equity, and Accessibility Programming at People's Lightwhich is a [League of Resident Theatres Category D] theater in Malvern, just thirty minutes west of Philadelphia. I'm responsible for the accessibility supports that we offer during our seven-production season. These include the relaxed performances, open captioning, ASL interpretation, audio description, and something very new, our smart caption glasses, which is something that we are the first theater in the United States to offer. So, it's all very exciting work.

Hannah Simpson: Hi, my name is Dr. Hannah Simpson. I'm a lecturer in theatre and performance at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland in the UK, and I work mostly on the representation of the human body on stage, and politicized representations of the body more generally. And I've got special interest in the work of Samuel Beckett in depictions of physical pain and disability and issues of audience access.

I have written two monographs, *Samuel Beckett and the Theater of the Witness: Pain in Post-War Francophone Drama*, which was published with Oxford University Press in 2022, and *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*, which was published with Palgrave also in 2022. And I've published work on disabilities specifically in journals like *Theater Topics, The Journal of Beckett Studies*, the *Journal of Modern Literature* and the *Journal of Feminist Scholarship*.

Andrew: We're so excited to have everyone today. Hui, I think, has created an excellent structure for the conversation, but it's going to be relaxed itself, a little bit open-ended and a bit of a discussion. We want to begin just with a brief introduction to Hannah's new book on Samuel Beckett and disability performance,

specifically chapter four on "*Not I*: Touretteshero, 2017–2020," and questions of audience access and relaxed performance.

So maybe we can just start there.

Hannah: Yeah, so this is my most recent book, *Samuel Beckett and Disability Performance*. And the book grapples with depictions of disability in Samuel Beckett's theater work, and both in the original play texts themselves, and with a really specific eye to how disabled actors and theater practitioners have encountered and embodied these disabled bodies in their depictions.

It's sort of a dual work, and every chapter deals with a specific play text, and is paired with a specific performance. And so it's half me talking about the play text and about various theoretical issues that it sends up, and then half is practitioners being interviewed about their work. And that perspective. And, and it's very much born out of this question of what is it about Beckett's work that has attracted so much disability performance, and the idea that this is work that is really, really engaged all the way through with impaired bodies and alternative impairments and environments in a way that hasn't really actually been recognized in the critical field as much as a lot of disabled practitioners have recognized these, they're really lived experiences of disabilities and this figures. And so a lot of the book, the sort of speaking to an academic audience and saying we need to follow what these practitioners are seeing, there's something here that we have overlooked by reading these bodies metaphorically, etc. We have quite a lot to learn from the practitioners here.

Hui: The first time that I know about your work is the article that you published I think years ago, in *Theater Topics*, talks about an audience member who has Tourette's Syndrome and how they perceive the show. And in that article, you introduce a concept, relaxed performance, which you also mentioned in your new book, chapter four, when you talk about audience access. So I'm just wondering,

in your definition, what is relaxed performance and why is it so important in the industry right now?

Hannah: Yes, so I very much follow Jess Thom, the director, primary performer of Touretteshero. She's a performer with Tourette's syndrome that manifests in both verbal and mobility tics. And she's worked in relaxed performance for a long time. Almost all of their company productions are relaxed performances. She defines relaxed performance as performances that take a relaxed attitude to behavior in the auditorium. It is nothing to do with the idea that the art on stage is more relaxed, or more half-hearted or less aesthetically engaged, etc. It's the recognition that as a range of spectators in the audience, we have different attentional behaviors. Some people will make more noise and people will need to move around more, etc.

And this is obviously particularly useful when you're thinking about access. If you have people who very literally cannot control what their bodies are doing in accord with a certain, you know, quite old fashioned silent, still audience, etc. But it is also interesting in that that is true of a lot of people who don't have an official diagnosis of any disability. We have different attentional behaviors. And you know, a mobile spectator or a slightly rustling spectator, etc. can be a very, very engaged and interested spectator. That's what relaxed performance tries to recognize and allow for.

Leigh: At People's Light, we have one relaxed performance for every production, and what we typically do is we raise the house lights so people can move around safely. We have a chill space. We announce at the beginning of the performance that this is a relaxed performance in which we relax the typical rules of theater etiquette. And that means allowing or inviting people to be who they are. It means we say explicitly this is a "no-shush zone." So people can vocalize as they need to. They can communicate with devices as they need to. And what I have found is the invitation is clearly extended to everyone. We often have other people whom I

believe to be neurotypical, who take advantage of the invitation as well, and who move in and out of the theater as they need to. I mean, to be a little explicit about it, we have a lot of middle-aged men who get up and take advantage of the freedom to go to the bathroom. And yes, they're welcome to do that. It's wonderful. So our invitation is much more than who you think we're inviting.

Hui: As a researcher who is now writing a dissertation on relaxed performance and experience-making of a neurodivergent audience member, I always remember that my friends commented on my project saying, Hui, you're doing something about relaxed performance, you must feel so relaxed during the whole research process. Quite the opposite. I feel sometimes overwhelmed, I feel lost, I feel torn while watching a relaxed performance. And I think Hannah, you mentioned in your article, actually we have a lot of different definitions of relaxed performance. And I personally consider relax here as a verb, means loosen the rules and norms, implicit or explicit rules and norms of spectatorship in theater in order to accommodate differences in the means of an audience member. So I think that the rules and norms are more in the house rather than on the stage, because I came from a background of audience study and I'm personally more interested in how audience members perceive the show. But of course, later, we can discuss how the access should be also built into the very beginning of the making of the art.

But I think a lot of people know about the term "relaxed performance" as an audience member, because you would know when you buy the ticket and there is like a pop-up window saying that you purchased a relaxed performance. So I think that is the way that I know about relaxed performance as an audience member. But as a term being officially introduced to theater industry, I think it is 2012 and 2013, UK has incorporated this relaxed performance pilot project and so that there are in total eight theater companies in West End, and they're trying to investigate the value of incorporating relaxed performance in their regular schedule.

Andrew: It's just so important. And as the sort of nonperformance interloper here, I would love for us to discuss a little bit about neurodiverse, neurotypical, which are common terms, but maybe they deserve a little unpacking here. And then also, maybe even a brief moment on general expectations, when quietness came to be, and how relaxed performance really seems to interact with them, maybe having its own evolution or chain.

Hannah: Yes, absolutely. Because this is one of my current bugbears. My students are fed up hearing about it. Neurodiversity as a term simply refers to the fact that all of our brains, all of our neurological systems operate in slightly different ways. We're all neurodiverse, everybody sitting in this meeting right now is neurodiverse, and yet there's no such thing as a neurodiverse individual, for example. That doesn't make sense. But within that concept of neurodiversity, we have the concepts of being neurotypical and being neurodivergent, and neurotypical being the idea that our brain system, our sensory system, our neurological system, functions as we broadly expect it to do. So in a medical sense, in a cultural and social sense, we sort of fit the expected norm. We behave as people expect us to do, and our sensory system operates as we expect it to do. Neurodivergent people diverge from that expected norm.

So we are getting into that tricky question which comes with defining disability as to how far we think about these things as medical, and things that diverge from what we think of as standards of health or useful necessary functioning, and how far we're talking about simply diverging from a constructed social or cultural expectation of this is how your body should work, this is how your brain should work.

Hui: And I also would add that neurodiversity, this term, was actually used first by the autistic community, first in the nineties. So it's born out of an autistic community, and I understand it as a political point of view: that the neurodiverse

community, the way that they perceive the world hold the same way as neurotypical persons.

Leigh: I will say in our theater when we talk about neurodiversity, we often talk about different forms of, or different broad categories of, neurodiversity. So we often talk about people with dementia. We'll talk about people with PTSD. We'll talk about other ways in which the brain might function differently from the expected ways. So, our invitation for a relaxed performance is to people with dementia, is to people with PTSD, and other other ways in which the brain just may not conform to what we think it ought to be doing.

Andrew: I'm also very curious–hopefully this isn't too elementary–what might be some of the typical expectations of an audience that relaxed performance is meant to diverge from itself? And, you know, where are those expectations? Does it have a history? Do they seem rather uniform through most performance spaces, or are there particular places where you'll see them or not?

Hannah: Yes, absolutely. This idea that we have a sort of modern and contemporary idea of what a good audience looks like: that silent, still, respectful audience. We interpret that sort of silence, stillness as respect, I think. It's an incredibly modern concept. I think a lot of people have a sort of vague historical sense of, say, for example, you know, Shakespeare's audiences at the Globe, the idea of the sort of raucous callback and, you know, vocal engagement with the performance. There is, as with most things in academia, there is discussion and debate as to exactly when we might pinpoint the beginning of this modern concept of theater etiquette.

At one point that there is a lot of historical evidence for, though, was the 1950s in the UK, at least where we are in the middle of a sort of social and political upheaval following World War II. There's a lot of shifting of class behavior, class categories. And one thing that we see is a lot of the theater industry starting to really police and instruct audiences in how to behave. You see theaters publishing

guides on how to behave. The Royal Festival Hall publishes, actually, a “man’s guide” to coughing, to warn you not to cough during performances. One theater company sent celebrity actors into schools to teach children how to behave. Don’t eat sweets, don’t rustle, don’t move about. Make sure your parents don’t talk to each other.

We do have this moment in the 1950s where we can see this work being really explicitly taught. This new idea. And I think now we’re much more accustomed to that being a self-policing idea. It’s become ingrained in us at a cultural level that that is what is good. We sort of treat it as an ahistorical, acultural idea, or at least a lot of mainstream white theater is doing. And I think most people who have experienced being policed and being shushed, etc., I would guess it’s more often from other audience members than from the theater necessarily. It’s become a sort of self-replicating system. We all police and discipline each other rather than meeting theaters to do it necessarily, which I imagine makes the work quite hard in terms of trying to overturn those ideas.

Leigh: Hannah, how does the presence of cell phones complicate that issue?

Hannah: I think cell phones is one of the trickiest questions because again, and I think there’s such a generational gap there as well, isn’t there? And I absolutely recognize that idea of, you know, the light goes on, someone, You know, A.) the fact that the light of the phone might genuinely be distracting you. But simply the idea that you can see someone not paying attention. And the very legitimate concerns that we’ve seen about recording, or you know, taking photographs of the actors on stage, particularly if they’re sort of intimate scenes, etc.. And I think there’s far less recognition in the general public of the fact that you may need your phone. It may be a technological access device, it may be, you know, something legitimately work related if you are an emergency health care worker, etc.. But I think that’s one of the hardest things. I mean, quite honestly, myself as

well, I see a teenager with a phone and my inclination is to go: Stop that! And have to think very carefully.. Hang on. You don't know. Let them be. They're fine.

Leigh: We recently had an issue at a theater performance on Broadway where one of the actors stopped the performance to scold a patron who was actually using her phone for accessibility and was very, very upset by the public shaming of it. And I think that's you know, an example of somebody who, one, the actor was not prepared for what was possibly, what was clearly a legitimate use of the phone.

But also it was not.. it was a blurry situation. It wasn't clear how this person was using the phone. It had not been explained. And it was painful all around. So it's worth the conversation.

Hui: Yeah. Going back to Andrew, your question about the expectation of audience member, I personally think that relaxed performance actively responds to this ableist etiquette, to being a quiet and still audience member which is a social construct of theater history, and I think even today, if you go to see a show, I just saw a show yesterday, it was 3 hours and 30 minutes without intermission. I wish that was a relaxed performance so I could at least go out and take a break and come back. But it was not. So you can still see this, the quiet and the still receptivity continues to dictate, like, when, where and how one should pay attention during the show. But relaxed performance really actively responds to the rule, to the norms, by, as what Leigh said,

turning the house lights on, allowing audience members to vocalize, encourage audience members to move around doing the show.

Leigh: I'm thinking about black American theater audiences and how there is an element of participation and call and response that is not necessarily expected... but it is welcomed. And I think that that is sort of an interesting exception to the

rules and expectations and is probably more aligned with the idea of the relaxed performance from the perspective of the audience members.

Hannah: That's certainly something in the UK, Kwame Kwei-Armah, whenever he took over artistic directorship of the Young Vic in London and talked a lot about the very necessary and very difficult job he had of diversifying that West End theater audience and said that he didn't necessarily realize when he first arrived, but that's such a crucial part of that job was actually, the sort of microcosm of of audience etiquette, the idea that, again, an engaged audience member who is enjoying, and who is listening may there be vocally engaged, maybe, you know, call and response, maybe clapping. That is not a sign of disrespect. That is a very, very clear sign of engagement.

I think one of the flip sides we've had or having at the minute in the UK, about this debate is the question of class. I've started to see responses whenever people bring up this idea of, you know, silence and stillness as a very middle class or upper middle class etiquette. And a lot of resistance from working class individuals, they're saying, you know, there is something incredibly patronizing about this. Just because I'm working class doesn't mean I don't know how to be quiet at the theater. I know what a theater is, I'm manager of the cinema, etc.. I think it's becoming one of the slightly more divisive bits of discourse where people are trying to, you know, out of good reason, trying to point out where we get these cultural constructions from.

And you run into these problems of sort of amassing ideas around, around a class, around a culture, etc.. It's one of the tricky bits of the discussion in the UK, at least at the moment.

Leigh: I think in the end what it boils down to is a certain kind of normalizing of behavior. What are we considering to be normal audience behavior? I have a very, very wise and wonderful colleague who was talking about inviting people into the audience who vocalized and she had a performance where I think there was one

person who was vocalizing and she said, what we really need to do is to invite more people so that this feels normal and expected. And I thought that was such a great idea, you know, to understand that this is not exceptional behavior, but it is but it is something that is very welcome and is more universal than we all think it might be.

Andrew: I think this leads us to a question that I know that Hui has, which is, how do these performances get described and communicated to people? Are they disability specific? Are they welcome to all? What are the challenges that come with choosing one over the other in order to make it a space that's very inclusive, but then also isn't just limited to a particular type of normal and then abnormal behavior that sort of maintains a sort of classic split?

Hui: Yeah, I think that is the struggle that I have right now when I'm trying to write about relaxed performance, because based on my observations of the theater company who feature relaxed performers in the past two decades, they are trying to make their language very inclusive, saying that this is something welcome to all. But at the end of the day, they need to describe their so-called target audience member. They would have to say, oh, this is for autistic community or anyone who has a sensory processing difference. So, they do have to specify at the end, even though you're trying to be inclusive. So I think that is the question that I have right now. I think I don't have an answer right now.

I want to hear Leigh, your thoughts on this because you are a practitioner in the field. So how do you deal with this?

Leigh: We just had a really interesting experience. We have for some years now offered relaxed performances for productions that we consider to be more adult in content and sophisticated ideas, all this kind of thing. The audience is typically older. And we had been offering our relaxed performances on Sunday matinees. We decided that we would experiment with offering the relaxed performance on a Friday evening. We just did this and the audience was very small. And I think that

two things were happening. One, I think the evening performance was not as accessible to our intended audience. And then my huge question, which I don't have an answer to yet, is whether the audience that typically went to a Friday evening performance said, Oh, this is not for us, and I don't know the answer to that. You know, we're asking the question. We're shifting things around to see what might happen. But I think that this–sort of to answer your question–this is something that we're still trying to figure out. It's a process.

And we had defined the relaxed performance as something that was open to everyone. But we also used a lot of language that identified . . . invited members as people who are neurodiverse.

And so I'm just wondering if the previous audience interpreted that as something that was less welcoming to them.

Hannah: Or perhaps even as well, I think sometimes there is that fear of taking up a resource as well. There is that sense of, oh, there is a need here that perhaps I shouldn't take that up if I don't if I don't desperately need it. And I quite like, Jess Tom has a slightly flippant but I think with a little bit of authenticity at the heart of it, idea that we should be moving to all performances as relaxed performances, as standard, and with some exceptions that are labeled "uptight performances." If you want an uptight performance, which I do, I quite like in an ideal world. I imagine part of the problem as well, though, is this idea of, if the ideal is universal access, universal design that allows everybody to be included, etc. We know on a practical level that doesn't work. People have competing access needs. If you have a hearing impairment, you might really struggle with a relaxed performance, For example. If you really need that, that stillness, that silence as well. So I do think this question of well, obviously there's sort of a, you don't want to risk that siloing is, as you're pointing out, Andrew, of going like, here is the performance for everybody, and then here is performance for other people. It's a really tricky balance there, thinking about competing access needs and the fact that I think

we'll never have a universal access design in any school of the world, let alone theater.

Leigh: Our relaxed performances often include ASL interpretation, audio description, and can include open captioning or the smart caption glasses, depending on the timing of the relaxed performance. I do think that that can create a sense of, I don't want to say competing needs, but I do want to say crowded needs, if that makes any sense.

You know, for one example, there are many people who are neurodiverse who need accessible seating. The ASL audience will need seating that often is accessible because it has to be very close to the interpreter. So we can't accommodate everyone. And this too, is a question about how to parse the different support systems so that we are accommodating everybody in the best way.

Hui: Yeah, I think for me, my observation is, in the US in the past two decades because, all starts from autism-friendly performance, that is initiated by Theatre Development Fund, TDF, they're doing this autism-friendly show on Broadway for autistic community, and 20 years later I interviewed them and asked them, have you ever think about changed your name to relaxed performance? And then they said no, because they know who their audience members are, they know who their community is, and they want to serve the community. So they don't want to change it to a more inclusive language. And that is something that surprised me. But on the other hand, I see a lot of theater company use relaxed performance, sensory–friendly performers and autism-friendly performance interchangeably, and that I think, make things more complicated. For me, I see scholars analyze relaxed performances through the lens of community theater if they know who their community are, who their community is, or through the lens of drama therapy. That is, too, a big school of thought. And there's a third kind of thinking is more, like what I'm personally more inclined to is, maybe this is an opportunity for

everybody, both neurotypical and neurodivergent, to discuss what kind of interpersonal relationship that we want in theater because, yes, we can loosen the rules and norms, but at the end of the day, you do need some rules and norms to share the time and space to watch the show together. And I think that is the invitation to everybody. We all need to discuss that.

Leigh: One thing that this conversation has not has not yet addressed is how the artists themselves are implicated in this. And the idea of drama therapy to me says, you want to shape the performance in a particular way. I could be wrong about that. But that's what it sounds like to me. And I think that the way that we conceived the relaxed performances at our theater is that we do not change the performance, not a whole lot. We used to maybe adjust the sound, maybe eliminate some sounds, but we don't do that as much anymore. We rely very, very heavily on our pre-performance guide to let people know what's coming and so that they can make some choices. But I do think, you know, I do think that there's a question about what we want from the audience, but also what we want from the performers.

And I will say that I have a number of our RP [relaxed performance] patrons who say we don't want the performance to change. We don't, because they view that as being very condescending, really, in a lot of ways.

Hannah: I think it's fascinating because it's getting at one of the reasons that I think your theater company is so exciting, it's this idea that you can make all the access requirements and needs, etc., that you want. You can have all the language about diversity and inclusion, if all your programming of relaxed performance are children's shows, and musicals, which is often the case in the West End and in London, that's not inclusive. That's your own quiet curatorial work going on there about who is coming to see relaxed performance or what people with access needs want to see, and that is still really, really pernicious in The West End certainly, so I think that's one of the sort of quiet exclusions that's

going on as well. But it's sometimes harder to pinpoint that work like your theater is doing so valuably.

Leigh: And the trick, though, is to find that audience for the adult RPs. And that's really the hard work. And we're trying to figure out how to reach people who want this. And this is why I sort of joke about the middle aged men, because I am finding that the relaxed performances for the adult productions are relaxed for so many more people than you would think. We also think about relaxed performances for parents of very young children. But I think that the adult performances, the adult productions are very, very tricky. One of the constant topics in the cohort that I lead is, how do we find this audience?

My experience, I don't know if this is universal or fair, but my experience with neurodivergent adults is that many do not belong to groups necessarily, and are and are often coming to theaters as individuals. So there is no kind of centralized space to invite people. So it's building this audience one participant at a time. And that takes time. But I think that we can get there. Also, what I'm not acknowledging is how many people may already be in the audience. And I don't know.

Hannah: Yeah, I mean, I think and this is very much me speaking from an idealistic academic perspective, not having to worry about my box office takings, etc..

But I do think one thing that is really interesting there, is this question of relaxed performance or simply relaxed cultural expectations around theater auditoria being a really useful thing for audiences in general. And I'm wary of sort of going down that line whereby we only do disability access if it's good for other people too, right? We weren't allowed to stim until fidget spinners were a thing and then everyone is allowed to stim.

But I do think it gets to the heart of why you turn to theater as a medium. You go there to be live and embodied with other people, but that's the defining point of the medium. And with both audience members and actors on stage, it's about being together, bodily. Otherwise, you know why go? Why not put on a film? Why not watch live television, etc.? So it seems really counterintuitive then, to have erected this cultural expectation that you also mustn't let it be known that you have a body, right? You've got to be as invisible as possible, and that if any other spectator, heaven forbid, makes you aware of their presence, that that needs to be shushed and disciplined. Then we have to go and gather together as a community and then pretend that we can't see each other. I think we are getting into the question of, well, why come to the theater then? Which is taking us away from the question of access. But I do think it's an intriguing possibility that relaxed performance opens up as well. A license to rethink the fact that the point of the theater medium itself.

Andrew: So one thing that I've been hearing in the conversation so far is that there's still this question of whether or not a relaxed performance could be a default performance or is it still an amended, or adjusted, or somehow different than what would otherwise be a default? So I'm wondering, what are some things that a relaxed performance challenges about the other conventions of performance that maybe would enhance, or change, or make better than other performance, and making it no longer something that's, you know, seen as other or inferior, but in fact could maybe, you know, push performance in new and important directions.

Hannah: I'm interested in this question in how it relates to this previous discussion we had of the kind of quiet, curious thing that goes on of what shows are suitable for relaxed performance. And one of the chapters of my book on *Beckett and Disability Performance* looks very specifically at Jess Tom's Touretteshero production of Samuel Beckett's *Not I*, which is canonically one of the most difficult shows for an actor to perform. It's incredibly intense, incredibly

demanding. It's also a really difficult show to watch. You know, it is designed and, you know, we have a lot of biographical material from Beckett himself, working to create this show that quote unquote, works on the nerves of the audience, not the understanding. And it's a really interesting case study, I think, because that is something where relaxed performance as a term can bring up issues, right? We're not always relaxed when we watch a performance, nor do we always go to the theater to be relaxed.

Obviously there are wonderful, entertaining shows where you can go and zone completely and have a wonderful time, but sometimes we go to be challenged or to see something incredibly intense, whether that's emotionally intense or, you know, dialogue intense, and Jess Tom spoke very specifically about how they choose *Not I* as a performance in part because she saw a lot of similarities between the protagonist's experience of life and her experience of Tourette's syndrome, but also because it laid down the gauntlet of what relaxed performance could be, if that was sort of the the end goal of a thing that could not be done as a relaxed performance and still work the way it was intended. If they could do that, then nobody could say to them, oh, well, this show wouldn't work as a relaxed performance. They could say, well, we've done Beckett. We've done Beckett's *Not I*. And it is one of the things that I go into in quite a lot of detail in that chapter. I think it is really fascinating because how do you craft a relaxed performance that allows you to be relaxed in the ways that are necessary under the criteria for what relaxed performance is, but also still recreates that tension and that real emotional intensity that is part of the play. Complicated, interestingly, I think, by the fact that the Samuel Beckett estate who licenses Beckett plays are very, very strict about them being done according to the author's intention. So they're quite happy, you know, they allowed a lot of adaptations for Jess Tom's *Not I*, but only those that fit with what the play was meant to produce. So they were also under that, the necessity of not going, Oh, we're going to do a "Not I" that everyone really enjoys, that's really chill and easy to listen to.

So we think it's a wonderful case study of how far you can push these ideas of relaxed performance and still have that aesthetic and verbal and emotional intensity as well.

Andrew: Incredible imagination, because it really shows you where things could go and maybe even just the beginning, because there's so much more to continue exploring. On the flip side, I'm really curious about what are some of the resistances to relaxed performance. You know, we get these splashy headlines sometimes that talk about some sort of disruption in the audience, and suddenly that becomes a big news item for some people because of the social controversy that it arises. But I'm also thinking, not just in practice or research, but just all of the avenues where relaxed performance is starting to be discussed and considered. And when there is this resistance, how is it best navigated? Like what are ways to diffuse the situation and to keep pushing forward in relaxed performance, which seems not just necessary as an ethical question, but it really seems to be a creative avenue that's going to really keep pushing performance, keeping it updated and finding new creative direction.

Leigh: I don't know if it's resistance as much as it is unfamiliarity. I don't work with the creative part of the theaters, with the artistic leadership in creating the productions. But I do think that now there is curiosity about what it means to include thinking about relaxed performances in the creation of art and very basic questions, like what is this piece? How do we make selections? How do we choose plays? How do we choose actors? How do we do this in a welcoming way, in a relaxed way, really? So I think that this is something that is starting to be considered again.

I, personally, because I have to prepare the actors for the relaxed performance, I see no resistance to it. They are so excited to see a broader audience before them, and responding in new ways. What I see is, really it's just unfamiliarity, but

there is universal enthusiasm to welcoming these new audience members. I mean, why not?

Hannah: That's such a lovely thing to hear, Leigh. That was really, really encouraging. I love that.

I have to agree with you. I think, you know, I'm slightly anecdotal here, but I think that a lot of people who, again, you know, sort of see relaxed performance and decide not to book it, it's not necessarily a decision of "I will like that because.." it's just a knee jerk reaction to, that's not what I usually go and see, and maybe I'm not 100% certain of what it is and if it's meant for me. I think in general it's very easy to win people around to relaxed performance when you explain what it is. I think a lot of people go, Oh, oh, I love that. You know, I love the idea of being able to get up or stretch or yawn or whatever. Just, again, acknowledge that you have a body, which again is just taking us back to this really difficult question of, how do you familiarize people with the idea, or are you sort of preaching to the choir whenever you talk about relaxed performance?

I think in a way and Hui, I'd be interested to know what you think about this, but I think within academia in particular, and this is perhaps more the case in the UK than the US, but there is still something of a resistance to audience studies as a field in its own right. I think certainly a lot of the audience studies experts that I know working within the UK often have to fight quite hard for it to be recognized as a field within its own right. The idea that, Oh, but you know, it's theater studies, right? You deal with the text, you deal with forms. And my friend Kirsty Sedgman is wonderful in sort of going: That's what the audience is. That's a really crucial part of theater studies. And we span all of our non academics. I'm talking about it, right? We're talking about good audience behavior and bad audience behavior and so on.

So, I think that's something within academia and within the UK. I'd be interested to know what you think from your perspective, Hui, that we are lagging behind a lot

on recognizing audience studies in its own right.

Hui: I can't agree more, and that is exactly my struggle right now. I have to fight. I have to advocate myself saying that yes, I'm more interested in what happened in the house than on the stage, which is totally unimaginable for a lot of my cohort and colleagues in the US. Yes, audience studies is a field in theater and performance, under the big umbrella term of theater and performance study.

Andrew: It sounds to me like we are at this really wonderful culminating point in the conversation. It's been so rich and vibrant, starting with some clear concepts on relaxed performance, this history of this social standard of quiet performance that really just doesn't seem to be suiting the future of performance, talking about neurodiversity in all its forms. But then learning such wonderful things about each person's individual context. So I want to invite everyone to give some final thoughts: where things are going, maybe talk about your own projects or research a little bit, or if there's some large concept that either you took from the conversation or you haven't had a chance to say yet that you really want to make sure people get to hear about, before we close things out for the day.

Leigh: One thing that I have to say is that we have to keep talking to the audiences that we are appealing to, and I think including them in the conversations about the accommodations, about the way the audience looks like, what the audience looks like, what we're doing for them, what's working for them has been so enlightening. And I think it's just so important.

Hannah: I think that the point I would most like to make, and it is very much born out of what Leigh is saying as well in terms of the work that your theater is doing, but it is the attention to how relaxed performance and embedded access is not simply a virtue signaling charity exercise. I think there is a lot of space to think about how it leads to aesthetic innovation and aesthetic excellence. You know, really astonishing work. My book looks really specifically at professional disability productions, which is not to say that there isn't wonderful amateur and

community and drama therapy work right there, but I think we run the risk of siloing this, this sort of artistic work off as something that isn't really art or again, isn't really for me, I don't need that access.

Of course I wouldn't go to see that. And I think I'm really excited to see what creative access and embedded access does to specific play texts, to specific performances, and yes, how it can be oriented toward how we think about the theater medium as a whole as well.

Hui: Yeah, for me I really like the pre-performance guide that is created by a theater company called Trinity Rep based in Rhode Island in the States. So they have a page that, talking to neurotypical audience members, just explaining what are fidget toys, what is repetitive speech, what are tics. So I feel like it's really an open conversation for both neurotypical and neurodivergent audience members to discuss, negotiate, and rehearse the ideal–if it is not too utopian, this term here–the ideal interpersonal relationship in theater, because as I said, even though we relax, we loosen the rules and norms to reflect, what do we mean by a normal or normative ways to behave in theater? We still need some rules and norms. Yeah, but we can talk about that. So I really appreciate relaxed performance gives us this discursive site and also prefigurative model to talk about interpersonal relationships in theater.

Andrew: On behalf of the Cultural Studies Association and Positions podcast, enormous thank you to our guests today and also a special shout out to the production team, including Mark, Elaine, and many others, and look forward to more podcasts coming soon.

Thank you so much.

Credits

Produced by Mark Nunes and Elaine Venter.

Hosted by Andrew Culp.

Production by Elaine Venter, Nick Corrigan, and Lucy March.

Editorial by Mark Nunes, Jeff Heydon, Ayondela McDole, Evan Moritz, Hui Peng, Shauna Rigaud, and Richard Simpson.

Music by Matt Nunes < https://open.spotify.com/artist/5r7EEqpB7cPsBRRV9ek1Ia?si=hdJkJavJQtid6R1VrkJDLg> .

[Editors' note: This work has undergone post-publication peer review through a published scholarly commentary and public comments.]

Notes

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Review of *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* by Jose O. Fernandez (The Ohio State University Press)

by Laura Irwin | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Jose O. Fernandez's *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* is an innovative project that takes conversations about literary and cultural history in a new direction. Recognizing the efforts of Black and Latinx scholars in crafting distinct literary traditions and histories, Fernandez uses his book to argue for cross-ethnic literary studies and identify similarities between Black and Latinx traditions. This endeavor revolutionizes conversations about literary history of the United States and challenges narratives of exclusion and silencing. This book serves to show the importance of knowing the names of authors and artists, and the communities that fought for them, because they make up the fabric of US history. To learn those names next to Faulkner, Twain, Hemingway, Steinbeck, and Fitzgerald not only makes them part of American literary tradition but also spotlights their absence and exclusion in a way that expands the boundaries of "literary tradition." This review takes seriously Fernandez's project, which opens exciting avenues for cross-ethnic historic study while also examining opportunities for future study.

KEYWORDS Black studies, Latinx, United States, cultural studies, history, humanities, literary studies, literature, mapping, narrative

Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures. By Jose O. Fernandez. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022. 216 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-8142-5849-1 US List: $34.95.

During a moment of both the visibility of Black and Latinx literatures and exclusion vis-à-vis book bans, questions of whose voice and story are included in narratives

of United States history are currently central. Although white supremacy and coloniality work to maintain an oppressive narrative that perpetuates exclusion and silencing, critical scholars such as Jose O. Fernandez are radically resisting this suppression by elevating Black and Latinx authors and their works. In *Against Marginalization: Convergences in Black and Latinx Literatures* (2022) Fernandez responds to this kairotic moment by honoring the legacy of Black and Latinx authors who developed distinct literary traditions and by mapping historic similarities between their literary traditions and shared histories to build solidarity based on current disenfranchisement. In doing so, he calls for generation of "cross-ethnic literary studies . . . to show instances of shared historical, cultural, and literary struggles that unite writers and people of color in the US" (10). This call powerfully works to take current conversations about the US narrative history and literary inclusion/exclusion in a new direction.

Fernandez is part of an emerging group of scholars and methods that conducts cross-racial and comparative analysis of Black and Latinx communities with a specific emphasis on the development of their literary traditions in this book. *Against Marginalization* is a groundbreaking project with ambitious goals to not only recognize and build cross-ethnic solidarity based on shared experiences of exclusion and perseverance but also to carve out a space in literary studies to explore shared histories and stylistic qualities.

In the Introduction, "Contextualizing Black and Latinx Literatures," and Chapter 1, "Convergences in Black and Latinx Literary Histories through Publishing," Fernandez contextualizes a number of Black and Latinx authors writing in the colonial period through the 1970s and the Black and Latinx independent publishing infrastructures developed to support them. Black and Latinx communities are the backbone of their respective literary traditions because they established their own readerships and print cultures to distribute Black and Latinx voices. Fernandez insightfully shows that these communities and infrastructures serve as the life-force that sustains the accomplishments of Black and Latinx

writers in the past and present. Readers may find it troubling when Fernandez suggests that the goal for Black and Latinx authors was to be included in mainstream publishing to reach white audiences (40). I wonder if all the writers he selected were attempting to be included in the dominant US publishing industry, or were they more concerned with creating an alternative public sphere which adhered to their own shared cultural ethics. Being included in the teaching of US literary history and adding voices to the US narrative are very different from wanting to be included by mainstream publishers and Fernandez falls short in attending to these distinctions of inclusion and does not go far enough to question whether inclusion is truly the goal for each of these authors or if inclusion *should* be the goal.

The bulk of the book consists of case studies in which Fernandez juxtaposes a Black author and a Latinx author and describes their shared literary aesthetics. For instance, in chapter 2, Fernandez argues that Amiri Baraka's *The Slave* (1964) and Luis Valdez's *Bandido!* (1981) engage postmodernism in their respective theater traditions to depict nationalist aspirations. These works, according to Fernandez, are examples of Black and Latinx engagement in postmodern tradition in order to challenge the fixed, monolithic, objective reality of US history by reclaiming "previously overlooked figures in dominant historical discourses and offer them agency to recreate and alter the historical memory of each group" (78).

Chapters 3 and 4 serve to demonstrate the complexity and non-monolothic nature of Black and Latinx authors to challenge generalizations made about these communities and their literary contributions. In chapter 3, Fernandez describes the works of James Baldwin's *Tell Me How Long the Train's Been Gone* (1968) and Rudolfo Anaya's *Bless Me, Ultima* (1972) as examples of how authors balanced their aesthetic goals with social preoccupations in their stories of the devastating effects of war on Black and Latinx communities. In chapter 4, he describes the works of Ralph Ellison's *Shadow and Act* (1964) and *Going to the Territory* (1986),

and Richard Rodriguez's *Days of Obligation* (1992) and *Brown* (2002) to demonstrate how Black and Latinx authors resisted the burden of social protest and instead argued that cultural development was the result of "cultural exchanges among different racial, ethnic, and immigrant groups from the country's formation to contemporary times" (105). Reading Baldwin, Anaya, Ellison, and Rodriguez, Fernandez acknowledges how Black and Latinx authors throughout history have grappled with incorporating social consciousness or remaining "apolitical" in their work (124). Fernandez's discussion represents a restricting binary for Black and Latinx authors—whether to incorporate social consciousness or be apolitical (with the underlying implications being that to be socially conscious is to be socially responsible and representative of their respective group or to forego social responsibility and thus be dismissive of marginalized experiences). I wonder if Black and Latinx Studies scholars might find this somewhat simplistic or at least lacking necessary nuance in discussing the alternatives to either route.

Chapters 5 and 6 situate Black and Latinx authors within modernism and literary naturalism, respectively, to inscribe Black and Latinx stories, communities, and experiences into the US literary tradition.These chapters detail the effects of living in oppressive economic systems which led to cycles of poverty, and the role of these authors and their works in opening a window to the interlocking systems of oppression at play for Black and Latinx communities. Authors and their stories, such as Alice Walker's *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and Helena María Viramontes's *Under the Feet of Jesus* (1995), use modernist techniques in their respective descriptions of agricultural experiences of Black sharecroppers and Latinx farmworkers. Edward P. Jones's *Lost in the City* (1992) and Junot Díaz's *Drown* (1996) use literary naturalism to demonstrate the destructive impact of oppressive economic systems experienced by urban communities of color.

Frequently throughout the book, Fernandez establishes that he doesn't conflate the distinctions between Black and Latinx histories. He acknowledges the

significance of developing distinct literary traditions and argues that solidarity can be built on recognizing similarities. Fernandez chose to juxtapose certain authors based on similar aesthetic literary styles, similar genres, similar experiences with exclusion from the mainstream literary tradition, and similar fights for social recognition. Nevertheless, in his efforts to honor the particularities of Black and Latinx histories, Fernandez draws lines between the communities creating a confusing paradox within the book. He titles each of his case studies "convergences" (which suggest intersections that challenge the segregation and categorization created by white supremacy) but then maintains those categories by describing Black and Latinx authors separately. In doing so, he misses the moments when those communities spoke to each other or the identities that cross each community, such as AfroLatinx or mixed-race individuals. I understand that state and community-based identity structures often historically resulted in the exclusion and silencing of Afro-Latinx or mixed race authors. This makes it difficult for Fernandez to identify such intersections; still, the word "convergences" signals a promise that falls short.

Having said that, the complexity of navigating the balance between avoiding conflation and maintaining strict oppressive categories is not an easy task. This book tackles this complexity by modeling what it looks like to conduct comparative analysis by describing the impact of distinct racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of Black and Latinx authors while also demonstrating their similar experiences with being excluded from mainstream US literary traditions while fighting for recognition for their respective communities. Therefore, I commend Fernandez's project and appreciate the strategic power of identifying parallels between these communities the potential for uniting Black and Latinx literary traditions and cultural communities, rather than perpetuating divisions among them.

After reading the book, I am left with the question: what would Fernandez like readers to do with the similarities he identifies, beyond recognizing them and

including them in discussions of US literary history? Given the unprecedented nature of this type of study, it is understandable that Fernandez's first task was identifying these similarities and leaving for later what to do with/about them. Additionally, he may have left this question unanswered to allow his readers and students the opportunity to explore and create meaning for themselves.Ultimately, *Against Marginalization* is an innovative project in which Fernandez honors Black and Latinx literary ancestry. Through this book, Fernandez himself becomes an ancestor for future scholars by making space to recognize and build solidarity based on shared experiences with exclusion and with efforts toward community, perseverance, and voice.

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Review of *Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory* by Cristina Visperas (New York University Press)

by Patrick Michael Teed | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT In *Skin Theory*, Cristina Visperas identifies how the captive body in the postwar era is positioned as the ideal test subject. She does so through a thorough interrogation of Albert Kligman's primarily dermatological human experiments at Holmesburg Prison to argue that racial capture enables the research enterprise. Suturing conversations in Black studies, science and technology studies, and carceral studies, each chapter reads objects in relation to these experiments to argue that grounding its brutal procedures was a visual culture enabled by the figurative uses of the skin.

KEYWORDS anti-Blackness, carcerality, prison, race, technoscience, visual culture

Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory. By Cristina Mejia Visperas. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2022. 243 pp. (paperback). ISBN: 9781479810789. US List: $30.00

In *Skin Theory: Visual Culture and the Postwar Prison Laboratory*, Cristina Visperas interrogates how the post-war test subject found its "ideal figuration in the captive body" (2). Through a rigorous examination of the medical science program at Holmesburg Prison, pioneered by the venerated dermatologist and University of Pennsylvania professor Albert Kligman, she argues that Kligman's experimental procedure discloses the quotidian racial violence rendering scientific

method possible. In her consummately interdisciplinary study, she elaborates “a common optical rationality” (2) across both medical science and capture, a scopic regime fixated on the symbolic and material uses of the skin. While *Skin Theory* analyzes a variety of different sources related to Kligman’s experiments, Visperas retains a clear vision of how the skin, and its multiple figurative and material iterations, grounds the carceral visuality she critiques.

Early in the text, Visperas provocatively states that “entanglements between science and captivity were neither accidental nor contingent but *paradigmatic*” (10), and so her text is “less interested in charting a visual narrative of scientific racism than in studying science as a fundamentally racial optic” (11). In so doing, she theorizes the imaging of the scientific structure of racism as the cause and organizing force of the scientific gaze, demonstrating how the “perfect control conditions” (12) of the laboratory mirror those of the prison.

Across all six sections of the text (an introduction, four chapters, and a coda), Visperas reads the skin as a primary organizing mechanism for the racial structure of laboratory science. In the introduction, she adumbrates the theoretical contours of her argument, positing that central to the scopic underpinnings of scientific research is an epistemological investment in racial capture. She concludes with a novel reading of Fanon’s deployment of the language of microscopy to argue that, for Fanon, “[B]lackness is *pre-visual*” (21), even as it is over-determined by the look. In so doing, she identifies anti-Blackness as “something that remains stuck in method, in perpetual preparation and anticipation of its final product, the image” (21). Thus, while raciality is located within the skin, it requires a method to stage its appearance (hence its *pre-*visuality). Refusing to identify the skin with some transcendental power to signify difference, Visperas instead explains how, despite being a category of phenotypic differentiation, epidermal racialization requires ongoing work.

Building on this theoretical framework, Visperas introduces the reader to some of the specifics of Kligman's dermatological experiments in her first chapter, provocatively arguing that Black skin operates as a screen to both visualize and vitalize whiteness. This chapter performs the difficult but impressive theoretical work of contending with the racializing processes operative within an experimental procedure disproportionately targeting Black skin, but for the express goal of improving white dermatological outcomes. That is, she confronts the aporia central to Kligman's experimental process: the use of Black skin as a means to generate dermatological interventions that benefit a white audience both predicated on and necessarily disavowing a racial-essentialist logic of epidermal difference. Through close readings of research photographs, particularly those focusing on Kligman's tretinoin experiments, she argues that Black skin forms the canvas or screen for the articulation of white patients. Tracing the symbolic deconstruction and reconstruction of racial epidermalization, its (pre-)visual locatedness within the skin, Visperas demonstrates how race constitutes a mode (not an object) of seeing in the photographs.

In the second chapter, Visperas grapples with Kligman's brutal research on allergenicity and irritancy. Illuminating the mechanics by which Black pain is rendered imperceptible, Visperas demonstrates how this imperceptibility served to install a "captive agency" (78) in the test subjects, further authorizing the intensification of Kligman's violent experimental methods.

In the third chapter, she shifts registers to emphasize the architectonic structure of the prison itself, engaging ruin photography and paranormal television. She provides readings of how these different artistic sites memorialize Holmesburg and the violent experiments it once housed—even when, in the case of the television show *Ghost Stalkers*, its history is disavowed. In so doing, she engages a much broader problematic concerning how the skin operates as a spatial organizing tool within architecture, and further theorizes the abrasions of ruin and

its capture in relation to the dermal damage the prison enforced. However, it is her conclusion to this chapter that is most compelling (although somewhat disengaged from the prior argument).

In her conclusion to chapter three, she posits that the body that prison architecture refers to is perhaps not the external skin of the epidermis but the internal structure of digestion. In so doing, she draws Holmesburg toward Saidiya Hartman's work on anti-Blackness as the belly of the world, torquing Hartman's usage of the gestational and re-insisting on the importation of the digestional for theorizing captive violence.[1]

In her fourth chapter, Visperas offers close readings of the standards for testing on humans emergent at the time, arguing that the carceral conditions at Holmesburg occasioned the rise of bioethics and its contemporary standards of analysis. Thus, she traces how the emerging field of bioethics distorts the coercive conditions of prison research, adjusting the prisoner through the frame of a vulnerable population rather than a captive one and performing what she provocatively calls "ethical research practice through prison reform" (146). In her analysis, she approaches discourse as a skin that occludes the quotidian structure of terror and violence undergirding the prison system as a whole and prison experimentation particularly. In so doing, she reads how the "hieroglyphic" of captivity (132) is situated within a broader discursive field predicated on the ongoing and methodological work necessary to stage race pre-visually.

Finally, in the coda she compellingly argues that Black revolutionaries like Assata Shakur and George Jackson provide "an insurgent form of bioethics" (172) that challenges the state as the primary antagonist to Black life. Visperas suggests that their insistence on violence as a modality for redress—particularly revolutionary violence against the state—offers a different diagnostic for assessing the biomedical disparities endemic to states of enforced breach. In line with this, she contends that scholars working within the field of bioethics (and

perhaps the politics of science more broadly) must seriously contend with violence as a necessary and legitimate counterresponse to the state form.

Throughout *Skin Theory*, Visperas refuses to romanticize the possibility of an outside to the racial violence she diagnoses, continuously examining how forms of carceral "freedom" are yoked to submission and underpinned by domination. The reader is left with an unflinching critique of the scopic regime inaugurated by the postwar prison laboratory, and an understanding of the scale at which this regime has infiltrated our social world. However, Visperas's analysis of the paradigmatic structure of capture seems, at times, to be at odds with her investment in the particularity of the prison. She qualifies the prison laboratory as distinct from the clinical trial, which she claims is subtended by the doctor-patient dyad and its attendant model of care.

While *Skin Theory* is focused on the prison as a field of capture, the violent uses of the skin to which Visperas draws our attention are symptomatic not of a carceral architectonics, but of epidermalization under conditions of anti-Blackness, heightening the urgency with which we must all read and take seriously her claims. As we collectively negotiate the relationship between knowledge and liberation, Visperas's challenging and rewarding work demands we consider how the constitution of the former might radically foreclose the availability of the terms of the latter.

Notes

1. To think anti-Blackness as "the belly of the world" is to begin from the assumptive logic that the "*slave ship is a womb/abyss*," and to thus theorize racial slavery and its afterlives in relation to the belly as a material and theoretical site of dispossession. See Saidiya Hartman, "The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women's Labors," *Souls* 18, no. 1 (2016): 166. See also Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2007). ↩

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Review of *Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics* by V. Jo Hsu (The Ohio State University Press)

by Stacey Park | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT *Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics* by V. Jo Hsu examines how queer and trans Asian American (QTAPI) individuals have reshaped the narratives around their belonging in the United States or elsewhere. Hsu recognizes the ways pervasive narratives like the model minority myth have imbued the meaning of Asian American belonging with capitalist, heteronormative, ableist, racist, and patriarchal notions. Exploring oral histories, visual representations, essays, and numerous other forms of rhetoric, Hsu engages in "diasporic listening," a method that unpacks how QTAPI individuals have wrestled with these pervasive narratives and found ways of redefining their belonging. By focusing on the stories of trans, nonbinary, disabled, and other minoritized groups within the Asian American diaspora, Hsu shows how these diverse and individual stories contribute more robust meaning around being and belonging as an Asian American.

KEYWORDS Asian American, ethnicity, narrative, queer, race, rhetoric, trans studies

Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics. By V. Jo Hsu. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2022. 226 pp. (paperback) ISBN: 978-0-8142-5845-3. US List: $29.95.

Constellating Home: Trans and Queer Asian American Rhetorics builds on a central belief in the power of narrative. Stories have the power to be a mirror, moving people toward self-recognition—how, where, and why they belong in the

world around them. Hsu, like many Asian American scholars, recognizes the ways in which the model minority myth is a powerful and pervasive narrative that circulates and harms this process of self-reflection. Hsu offers a cogent analysis and synopsis of how the model minority myth has been imbued with patriarchal, heteronormative, ableist, racist, and capitalist notions, which makes the model minority myth something that many queer, trans, and disabled Asian and Pacific Islanders (QTAPI), across generations, cultures, and regions, confront in one way or another. Hsu's text chronicles the diverse methods and means that queer, trans, and disabled Asian and Pacific Islanders forge their definitions of belonging.

By focusing on individual stories, and highlighting the oral histories, interviews, and visuals of different QTAPI archives, Hsu stitches together narratives like patchwork—bringing together many subjects and their attachments and relations to "love, resilience, and ancestry" (26). This stitching creates a fluid, liberatory constellation of "multiply-situated subjects [that] connect multiple discourses at the same time" (10–11). Attentive to the co-existence of—and at times contradiction between—these stories Hsu uncovers many homes, many ways of belonging. One of the more powerful and beautiful aspects of this book is the way Hsu shows these stories, their uniqueness and idiosyncrasies, already existing. Mapping their stories out to show that there is not one way of being or relating as a QTAPI person—Hsu explicitly notes that bringing these narratives together is not an endeavor to sum up some kind of "singular truth" about being Asian American and Pacific Islander (11). Instead, these constellations are "about listening for and accommodating a multiplicity of relationships and responsibilities" (11). Each chapter outlines the stories that contend with some aspect of the model minority myth, noting the ways in which these individuals have remade their relations to themes of "love, resilience, and ancestry" on their own terms (26).

Chapter 1 draws from stories and interviews that were gathered through the Dragon Fruit Project (DFP), which is "an ongoing oral history project . . . involving

hundreds of volunteers in collecting, coding, and disseminating personal accounts of QTAPI activism from the 1960s to the present" (27). The stories that Hsu draws on from the DFP archives reflect how QTAPI individuals have redefined love, and the expectations of love and romantic relations that are demanded from heteropatriarchal standards. This chapter details the work of Amy Sueyoshi and her interviews with younger and older generations of queer Asian Americans, and outlines several stories of individual QTAPIs who offer "defiant reconfigurations of those social forms" in differing, and even contradictory ways (70). But Hsu recognizes that the "polyvocal nature of the archive" and the "paradoxes" found in these individuals' stories, existing in a constellation, is an illustration of "mobile sites of belonging that maneuver across generational and cultural distance" (70).

Chapter 2 traces a theme of resiliency across the work of Mia Nakano's Visibility Project (VP), which comprises digital archives of queer and disabled Asian and Pacific Islander women and trans people through oral histories preserved mainly through videos, photos, and text. This chapter recognizes that both visibility and invisibility affect Asian Americans in how taxonomies are created and used against them to belittle, fetishize, or dismiss them as less than or other. The portraits and stories in this chapter highlight how individuals have situated their gender, sexuality, strength, and/or beauty through ways that defy how these harmful taxonomies circulate. In examining the VP's work and mission, Hsu notes that "they offer shelter for utopian dreaming" in which "resilience is reimagined as a communicative exchange where participants take shared responsibility for one another's vulnerabilities, fears, and desires" (107). Hsu notes, "If Asian American resilience is understood, not as that which positions us closer to white patriarchy, but as a communal empathy that refuses to leave one another behind, then we are able to revolutionize structures of exclusion rather than simply enter them" (107).

Chapter 3 examines the stories of participants in the Queer Ancestors project (QAP), considering "how the topos of ancestry shapes many LGBTQ+ Asian

American experiences of family and belonging" (111). This chapter "quer[ies] how we can conceive of familial lineages in ways that disrupt, challenge, and reinvent the categories that have isolated and harmed queer diasporic subjects" (113). In Hsu's examination of QAP, they recognize a more complicated legacy of "colonialism, capitalism, and their effects on human and nonhuman lives" and the ways in which QTAPI individuals make connections to ancestry and understand what ancestry means. The linocuts by the young artists contributing to the QAP reflect a disruption of "taxonomies that have organized dominant views of lineage, loyalty, and belonging" (140). Instead of finding oneself in some hereditary chain that is bound up in colonial ideas of race, origin, and/or ethnicity, Hsu points the reader to explore "a kuaer pedagogy that is open to novel identifications while grounded in material inequities and corporeal difference" (140). Hsu asks, "If the story we tell of our lineages is only one (restrictive) means of accessing kinship, how else could we draw our networks of care and our homeward journeys? How would doing so hold us accountable for settler exploitation, racial injustice, trans and queer phobia, ableism, and a wounded planet? What languages would we invent to access and nurture those connections?" (140) Hsu poses these questions at the end of the chapter, prompting readers to consider how there are endless possibilities and ways of acknowledging the past to make way for a more restorative future.

Chapter 4 is Hsu's own self-reflection and process of "queer diasporic homing" that highlights their "bodymind" as an archive—they show the reader how memory and the traces of one's story live in body as well. Hsu writes, "I propose here that the body, too, is an archive—that we carry with us our experiences and the stories we are given. We exceed them too, but these are the materials from which we build our worldviews" (149). Recounting their own experiences as a queer, trans, and disabled Asian American, this chapter points the reader to the ways in which Hsu has forged their own attachments to love, resiliency, and ancestry. They provide a glimpse into their family's history and Taiwanese cultural background, their experiences with their illness, their experience growing up in

Arizona, and the various circumstances that buttressed the writing of the book itself and its ideas. This last chapter, and the conclusion, is a display of vulnerability and boldness, revealing how Hsu found their “way home” through their encounters and being in community with other queer, trans, and disabled Asian and Pacific islanders.

Hsu’s book is like a tapestry of stories, a tapestry that queer, trans, and disabled Asian and Pacific Islanders can recognize themselves in and are, by way of their existence, a part of. The mundane, significant, and diverse ways these individuals define their belonging co-exist in a cosmic orbit that is alive and thriving. For those interested in rhetoric studies, trans and queer studies, and Asian American studies, this book offers a case study in queer, trans, and disabled Asian and Pacific islander historiography and storytelling, depicting how these individuals have always forged, and will continue to forge, ways of being “at home” in their bodies and the spaces they occupy.

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Review of *Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective* by Lorgia García Peña (Duke University Press)

by Shreya Parikh | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT In *Translating Blackness*, Lorgia García Peña offers a transnational conceptualization of Black Latinidad. Framing Black Latinidad as an epistemology, García Peña traces its historical and contemporary formations through the lives and the work of historical Black Latinx intellectuals as well as contemporary Black and Black Latinx individuals in the Carribean, Italy, and the United States. García Peña approaches Black Latinidad as produced through *vaivén*—coming and going across physical and symbolic borders of nation-state and migrant-citizen categories that characterizes the sociological position of Black Latinx individuals.

KEYWORDS Blackness, Latinx, colonialism, migration, race

Translating Blackness: Latinx Colonialities in Global Perspective. By Lorgia García Peña. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, 336 pp. (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1866-7. US List: $27.95.

The summer of 2020 witnessed Black Lives Matter demonstrations in many parts of the Global South, where the question of anti-Black racism is assumed to not be relevant. Signs and slogans that protestors against the murder of George Floyd had used in the streets of the United States showed up in countries like Cuba, Ethiopia, Nigeria, and Tunisia, which are assumed to be homogeneously Latinx, Black, or Arab. In these Global South countries, these protests revived a

perplexing question among activists and academics: what are the implications of engaging US categories and symbols of Blackness in Global South contexts? Lorgia García Peña's *Translating Blackness* seeks to respond to this conundrum. By theorizing Black Latinidad as "an epistemology—a way of understanding and producing knowledge from the site of unbelonging," García Peña seeks to go beyond its conceptualization as an identity. García Peña builds her conceptualization of Black Latinidad using the lives and the works of contemporary and historical Black Latinx public figures as well as ordinary individuals primarily from Dominican Republic, Italy, and the US; together, the lives of these individuals allow for a multifaceted conceptualization of Black Latinidad that account for differences in experiences as well as trajectories along gender, socio-economic class, and migrant-versus-citizen lines.

García Peña argues that Black Latinidad has been constructed in a transnational context. To overcome the rigidity of nation-state borders that constrain academic studies on Blackness, García Peña approaches Black Latinidad as produced through *vaivén*—coming and going across physical and symbolic borders of nation-state and migrant-citizen categories that characterizes the sociological position of Black Latinx individuals. Primary and secondary-source materials that support García Peña's arguments include archival material like photographs, interviews, and literary texts by Black Latinx figures like Arthur Schomburg and Gregorio Luperón, as well as oral histories and interviews with Black Latinxs in the US, the Hispanic Caribbean, and Italy.

The book is divided into two parts. Part one, titled "On Being Black and Citizen: Latinx Colonial Vaivenes," traces the genealogy of the construction of Black and Latinx as non-overlapping identities which lie in opposition to each other. In Chapter one titled "A full stature of humanity," García Peña describes the tensions rooted in desires for national belonging that pushed US Black individuals to support colonizing nation-state projects while knowing that nation-states are themselves founded on violent exclusion. Through a critical reading of the life and

the work of abolitionist Frederick Douglass, García Peña shows that many US Black intellectuals (including Douglass) saw post-Civil-War integration into US's colonial expansionist projects as a form of integration into US citizenship. Colonization came to be seen as a path to equality and citizenship for Black people in the US, culminating in projects like the colonial formation of Liberia. Douglass supported the US project of annexing the Dominican Republic, with the belief that it could become a site of US Black emigration and more egalitarian (Black) citizenship.

García Peña describes the tensions in ideologies adopted by Black abolitionists like Douglass: Like white politicians, Douglass justified the colonization of "Latin" people with their "inferiority" and "weakness" at self-governance; at the same time, Douglass fought ideas of scientific racism that justified enslavement of Black people in the US (54). This political construction of Latinidad as different and inferior from (US) Blackness led to the construction of Blackness and Latinidad as separate (and antonymous) identities. In chapter two, titled "Arthur Schomburg's Haiti," García Peña delves into the conceptualization of Black Latinidad that questioned this imposed separation and hierarchization of Black and Latinx identities by studying the life and the work of Black Puerto Rican scholar Arthur Schomburg who was foundational in shaping Black Latinx intellectualism.

Part two of the book, titled "Black feminist contradictions in Latinx diasporas," theorizes Black Latinidad through the contemporary experiences and trajectories of Black migrant women. In chapter three, titled "Against Death," García Peña uses qualitative research carried over seven years with women-led organizations in Italy, New York, and the Dominican Republic to argue that many Black-Latina/x individuals are forced to migrate in order to escape "physical, political, and social death" (121); for example, a significant number of Dominican women migrate to Italy, either as sex or domestic workers, to escape poverty. But the "diaspora is not always less violent than home; it is simply a larger arena from which to fight

against the common enemy . . . [and] from which to possess a new form of knowledge in transnational community" (144).

In chapter four, titled "The Afterlife of Colonial Gender Violence," García Peña shows that Dominican women—like migrant women from Eritrea and Somalia (both ex-colonies of Italy)—witness marginalization along racial and gender lines in Italy and that this marginalization traces its genealogy in historical colonial projects undertaken by the Italian state. Yet, by "mystifying colonialism, Italy has escaped the kind of anti-colonial critique that proliferates in US, French, and British academies," and denied claims pointing to the existence of state-racism (156). In chapter five, titled "Second generation interruptions," García Peña describes how second-generation Black Latinx challenge the barriers linked to their inherited marginalization in Italy. Black and Brown migrant women and their children witness the impossibility of becoming full (social) citizens in Italy because national belonging (*italianità*) is rooted in ideas of white supremacy and racial purity. Upon gaining legal citizenship in Global North, Black and Brown migrants gain the privilege of cross-national mobility and access to state services and institutions. At the same time, legal citizenship does not guarantee belonging; many Black migrants and their descendants find themselves rejected from social citizenship in their new homes in Global North as well as in their countries of origin.

In the conclusion, García Peña reflects on the dual position occupied by US theorization of Blackness at the global level; she notes that "US history and radical struggles for freedom have afforded many people a lingua franca with which to articulate and translate blackness," while, at the same time, this articulation is made possible "in part because of US colonialism and cultural dominance around the world" (237). Instead of doing away with this US-centric theorization, García Peña calls for the theorization of Blackness in and through "new places and lesser-studied epistemologies and histories that decenter hegemonic blackness while being in dialogue with the important legacies of US

Black radical traditions" (238). In addition, García Peña also reminds readers that Global North states are not the only ones perpetuating violence linked to colonialism and its afterlives; in Global South states like Chile, the afterlives of colonial social structures perpetuate the marginalization of Black populations.

Translating Blackness stands out for its inclusion of Italy as a site of production and contestation of Black Latinidad; García Peña pushes the reader to consider sites that lie outside the common migratory routes of Black Latinx individuals. Bringing together the fields of Black and Latinx studies, García Peña, an ethnic studies scholar from Dominican Republic, offers a transnational conceptualization of Black Latinidad that goes beyond its academic theorization in the U.S. context.

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Review of *Breathing Aesthetics* by Jean-Thomas Tremblay (Duke University Press)

by Tori McCandless | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Jean-Thomas Tremblay's *Breathing Aesthetics* draws our attention to how respiration as a cultural analytic maps the uneven distribution of risk in our contemporary moment. Intervening at the intersection of queer theory and the environmental humanities, Tremblay deciphers an archive of cultural texts that range from CAConrad's ritualized poetry to Ana Mendieta's elemental performance art and Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*. In so doing, they reveal an understanding of how breath registers precarity across race, gender, and disability, while also serving as a mechanism for healing and care. This discerning analysis, combined with a focus on the exchange between body and milieu, makes a case for respiration as a distinctly ecological and embodied relation. Ultimately, *Breathing Aesthetics* provides crucial insight into how aesthetic expressions of respiratory variations evidence a tension between morbidity and vitality within bodies whose ability to breathe is most endangered.

KEYWORDS aesthetics, art, environment, gender, humanities, performance, race, sexuality

Breathing Aesthetics. By Jean-Thomas Tremblay. Durham, NC and London, UK: Duke University Press, 2022, pp. 248 (paperback). ISBN 978-1-4780-1886-5. US List: 25.95.

With palpable verve, Jean Thomas Tremblay's *Breathing Aesthetics* surveys how breathing, as a literal and figurative medium, indexes environmental crises while heralding a dialectic between morbidity and vitality. At stake in such a project is Tremblay's contention that respiratory crises, underwritten by the uneven distribution of risk, are embedded in how subjectivities are constituted. Within

Breathing Aesthetics, what this means is that bodies and ecological milieu are never felt in isolation, that when we breathe, we are irrevocably imbricated in the spaces we inhabit—and with each other. Yet such a relation jockeys between regenerative, life-sustaining practices and the violence inflicted on marginalized bodies, thus registering varying scales of oppression. In short, *Breathing Aesthetics* poignantly asks: how does breathing function as a "record of injury and a political vernacular" (5) just as its variations and interruptions might serve as a method for healing or pleasure?

Tremblay congregates a diverse repertoire of post-1970s literature, film, and performance art, while tracking the overlaps between queer and trans studies, the environmental humanities, and race and ethnicity studies. This myriad approach forwards a necessary intervention for scholarship invested in the interplay between bodies and environment—not to mention desire, ritual, and acts of survival staged in a precarious world. Those invested in the dialogue between sexuality studies and ecology will find this book indispensable. Moreover, the possibilities Tremblay maps for registering hurt and finding pleasure in a precarious world feel especially necessary as we enter our fourth year of the COVID-19 pandemic. Which is to say, their focus on how aesthetic mediation turns breathing into "a resource for living through crisis" (29) is timely. Of additional interest, in brief snapshots, Tremblay includes their own embodied experience of events such as the 2014 Black Lives Matters marches, reminding readers how crises in breathing shape the social fabric of our contemporary world, in addition to the forms of writing our scholarship must take.

In Chapter One, "Breathing Against Nature," Tremblay turns to the films of Ana Mendieta and Amy Greenfield, paralleling how their work foregrounds troubled respiration as a method of resisting essentializing feminisms. Charting representations of breath as they intersect with elemental aesthetics, Tremblay mobilizes the term "postpastoral," which undoes conventional affects tied to the sublime, rest, and even access to fresh air. Depastoralized breathing, then, stages

scenes where performers struggle to breathe or fail to find relief. Tremblay attends to Mendieta's *Grass Breathing,* where her body, covered by dirt and grass, can only be perceived via her distressed inhalations which move the ground. By rendering the body as a relation between subject and milieu, Mendieta, as a Cuban American woman, "indexes uneven geographies of asphyxiation" (52). Crucially, these geographies map how the "pastoral comes to feel bad" (43) amidst legacies of imperialism and colonialism. In Amy Greenfield's elementally titled films such as *Tides*, Greenfield swims through the ocean, holding her breath, submerging, and ecstatically yelling. However, the film mismatches sound and image, thus rendering a discomfort that withholds catharsis. As such, Greenfield remains wary of how elemental feminism links women's bodies to "nature," alternately framing scenes where breathing is disjointed and the pastoral, rather than replenishing, becomes suffocating.

In Chapter Two, "Aesthetic Self Medication (Three Regimens)," Tremblay considers how the self-writing of Dodie Bellamy, CAConrad, and Bob Flanagan manages desire and grief as it intersects with queerness and disability studies. Flagging how CAConrad sees themselves as part of a milieu that nurtures them while "also harboring violence normalized by transphobia, homophobia, misogyny, and racism" (77), Tremblay illustrates how mediations of ecological and embodied harm extend into modes of self-healing. They showcase one instance wherein Conrad's ritualized poetry provides a heuristic for breathing that sutures grief to homophobic violence, while in another, Conrad choreographs the inhalation of fresh air and herbs as a possible avenue for imagining oneself as another gender. Such a "regimen" envisions breathing as both a sign of hurt and a "medication." Flanagan's life-writing charts the impacts of cystic fibrosis on his body, especially as it comes to bear on his sadomasochistic and artistic partnership with Sheree Rose. Looking for breathlessness in Flanagan's performance art and life-writing, Tremblay models a generative methodological approach: they attend to actual breath in concert with its grammatical mediations. Ultimately, this chapter repositions how New Narrative's queer cohort, "casts breathing as a symptom and

antidote to crises" (69), while simultaneously calling attention to how desire constitutes subject formation.

In Chapter 3, "Feminist Breathing," Tremblay attends to the ceremonial poetry of Linda Hogan and Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters*, to show how feminist breathing stages rituals in order to constitute coalitions, even if the communities participating in these rituals are continually at risk. The chapter begins by tracking how "consciousness-raising" within feminist movements in the 1960s and 1970s traded in the idea of an oppressed people finally "breathing air" (95). However, Tremblay importantly suggests that WOC feminisms, such as those of Cherie Moraga, inaugurated a recognition of who can mobilize breath as a cathartic mechanism, and how this is contingent on the "concealment of the breathing needs of women of color" (97).

Taking a reparative tack, they then discuss how Hogan's poetry dialogues with NourbeSe Philips's theorization of prepositional breathing. This theory disrupts genealogies of breathing that ignore the original, maternal act of "breathing for"—whether or not this maternal breathing is welcome or a radical act of hospitality staged amidst anti-black violence. Hogan's poetry alternately lingers in the tension between the earth as a source of nourishment and its irreparable toxicity while focusing on reproduction. In line with this recognition of toxicity, Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* telegraphs scenes of healing that inform an investment in political futurity. For Bambara's female protagonists, "feminist breathing is communal training—a prep course for a return to activism" (110) that jettisons the idea that risk can be avoided. Across the chapter Tremblay contends that feminist "breath is reparative—and it is a call for reparations," it is necessary for survival and it marks the threat of not being able to survive.

In Chapter 4, "Smog Sensing," Tremblay orients their focus towards the urban environments of Renee Gladman's series *The Ravickians*. This genre-queer series centers on Ravicka, a city that is filled with yellow smog, while the narrative puts

pressure on the status of an event, rendering action as atmospheric and elastic. In *The Ravickians,* Tremblay develops the phrase "smog sensing," as a way to describe how breathing is relational and architectural. Smog sensing aids Gladman's characters in navigating the city amidst synthetic confusions and it acts as a technology: it is a way to perceive atmospheric contaminants and attune to built structures. As such, within Gladman's experimental style "breathing, walking, writing and drawing appear coextensive, such that writing alters atmospheres and breathing produces lines," (115) which ultimately speaks to how she conceives of the written line as measuring breath and producing narrative enclosures. Drawing on Black Studies, Tremblay then links what can't be perceived in the atmosphere of Ravicka to the opacity of its inhabitants, suggesting that both Blackness and queerness are atmospheric, framed just beyond discursive recognition. In other words, Tremblay makes an important intervention that outlines how the aesthetics of smog sensing manifest a politics of opacity, wherein breathing as a "locus [for] the opacity of embodiment and experience reveals itself as resource for ethics and politics" (138).

In Tremblay's final chapter "Death in the Form of Life," they orchestrate a dialogue between films that document the dying individual's last breath. Addressing *Near Death* directed by Frederick Wiseman and *Dying at Grace* by Allan King, Tremblay deciphers how the final moments between life and death in hospital settings are discursive. They argue that the nonviolent last breath is a matter of racial privilege while simultaneously highlighting how the insistence on a peaceful death is a fantasy generated by the living in order to manage loss and grief. While an overarching claim of *Breathing Aesthetics* is that we "never breathe strictly on our own terms" (139), its final chapter augments this claim, illustrating how these terms are also discursive, not just physical.

Surprisingly, I found Tremblay's coda, "Benign Respiratory Variations," one of the more inspiring moments of the text. The coda invokes queer theory as an instructive lens for addressing crises in breathing and is titled in homage of Gayle

Rubin's theorization of "benign sexual variations"—a term fashioned in the hopes of protecting consensual sex acts from state control and stigmatization. Gently linking sex and breathing, Tremblay foregrounds how "the state claims a monopoly over the interruption of respiration via police violence, environmental threats, and unaffordable health care" (160). Voicing the necessity of reclaiming these interruptions, Tremblay looks at a passage in Trisha Low's *Social Realism* where an S/M waterboarding workshop assembles a temporary community defined by "pleasurable respiratory interruptions" that "become a matter of collective responsibility and accountability" (161). This final meditation, both visceral and edifying, synthesizes the importance of *Breathing Aesthetics'* argument. In a world where our breathing is inherently morbid and unevenly imperiled—finding ways of collectively resisting while also reclaiming this precarity is vital.

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Tori McCandless is a teacher, writer, and PhD Candidate in the Department of English at the University of California, Davis. They are currently at work on a dissertation that explores the representation of environmental catastrophe and voice as it intersects with marginalized subjectivities in interwar poetry. Their writing can be found in *ASAP/Journal*, *Edge Effects*, and *Annulet: A Journal of Poetics*, among others.

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Review of *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* by Cameron Awkward-Rich (Duke University Press)

by Claudia Schippert | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT Simultaneously a project of metacritical reflections about disciplinary foundations at the intersections of the academic fields of transgender studies, disability studies, and Black feminist studies, and a series of close readings of cultural texts and artifacts central to those disciplinary developments, Awkward-Rich's book is intellectually generous, beautifully written, and deftly argued. Critically investigating the production of disability and transgender theories, forged interdependently and through distancing trans authority from the specter of madness and disability, *The Terrible We* traces conflicts among trans, queer, and feminist perspectives in closely reading foundational texts and cultural contexts. It presents an invitation to consider forms of maladjustment a productive resource rather than an impediment to trans life, thought, and creativity.

KEYWORDS Black feminism, disability studies, queer, theory, trans studies

The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment. By Cameron Awkward-Rich. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2022, 2086pp. (paperback) ISBN 9781478018681. US List: $24.95

One might not expect a book about bad feelings and mad habits to be a joy to read, but *The Terrible We: Thinking with Trans Maladjustment* is beautifully written and important. It is also a powerful and challenging intervention in the disciplinary self-understanding of trans studies, tracing developments from the celebration of public authority granted to some trans voices in the 2010s to the more recent return to transantagonistic public struggles. Awkward-Rich is writing

critically from the middle of a disciplinary field about the very founding of the field, at once relying on and simultaneously raising difficult questions about the "we" that constitutes trans studies.

Taking up the challenge of navigating antagonistic or phobic projections at the very foundation of one's (disciplinary) identity, Awkward-Rich is unflinching in his genealogical work confronting critical issues in the foundation of trans-studies; and he is generous in extending invitations to rethink foundational moments and theoretical moves, including the attendant disavowals and exclusions that created trans studies as a disciplinary field that distanced itself from disability and madness.

The main argument that informs the nuanced chapters is that "rather than only impeding or confining trans life, thought, and creativity, forms of maladjustment have also been central to their development" (17). *The Terrible We* further develops this claim through four chapters, an interlude reflecting on a set of artworks, and an afterword/elegy.

The first chapter, "Disabled Histories of *Trans,*" explores how the categories of disabled and transgender coemerged by chronicling the popular newspaper discourse about three transmasculine persons. The first, Evelyn "Jackie" Bross, was arrested in 1943 in Chicago for her masculine dress and haircut at a time in the United States when gender roles were shifting and crossdressing laws were being revised. When the judge ordered Bross confined in a psychiatric facility, the decision resembled an increasing number of cases in which those who did not fit gender or sexual norms were sent to the asylum, placing the production of gender nonconformity and disability in the same physical and disciplinary location, governed by broad assumptions of incapacity and expressions of disciplinary confinement as care. The second, Milton B. Mason, was arrested in 1895 for obtaining money under false pretenses (his gender nonconformity serving as ground for deception). Mason ended up exhibiting himself as a freak, performing

an exaggerated version of white transness in dime museums, where the dramatic staging of "human anomalies" was (co-)producing public displays of gender deviance and racial otherness within widely popular entertainment venues, in an era before the medical model of disability would increasingly reposition human variation as the object of medical science and individual pathology to be cured. Thirdly, Awkward-Rich discusses the unique history of Jack Bee Garland's "Disability Drag" at the turn of the twentieth century as an example of a momentary authorization of bodies marked as otherwise gender nonconforming and female-assigned. Refusing gender assignment in public debates, Garland passed as disabled, claiming an inability to speak. Garland was able to work the connection of trans and disability to their own ends, successfully asserting their transgender authority—which, as Awkward-Rich clarifies, was connected to elements of educational privilege and proximity to whiteness. The chapter ends with insightful comments about contemporary debates about crip/trans solidarity as complicated or risky. Engaging different perspectives of the "drama that produced the ADA's definition of gender variance as impairment but not protectable disability"(56), Awkward-Rich closes the chapter with the provocative suggestion that instead of continuing to attempt to disentangle transness on the one hand and forms of insanity or absurdity on the other hand (with the aim of resisting the equation of the two), "might insanity, tragedy, and absurdity be integral, rather than only inimical, to trans life and thought? What might we learn by thinking with, rather than against, the madness and maladjustment that is everywhere evident in trans-antagonistic and trans-affirmative archives alike?" (59).

The interlude between the first and second chapter, "Holding Space," explores Dylan Scholinski's 2013 performance installation that negotiates carceral and psychiatric spaces and the memories from within them. Here, Awkward-Rich helpfully clarifies the complex project of his book: "*The Terrible We* is not a disability studies approach to transness, nor is it a book *about* the overlapping experiences of transness and disability/madness, though it insists on that overlap.

Rather, it is a book that attempts to hold on to certain tools from disability studies—among other fields—in order to open trans studies itself up to different critical protocols. It is the record of my attempt to read with the forms of madness, distress, and maladjustment that are already endemic to transliterature and thought, to understand what they have enabled and might yet" (65).

Chapter 2, "Trans, Feminism; Or, Reading like a Depressed Transsexual," engages the often taken-for-granted incompatibility of trans and feminist theories of gender. Rather than building a theory of gender that can avoid epistemological roadblocks or bad feelings, Awkward-Rich argues for "living with the lack of trans feminist integration, even though it does not feel good." Intervening in the conflicts at the intersections of feminist and trans studies, chapter 3, "Some Dissociative Trans Masc Poetics," takes on the challenge of not eliding the connection of sexual violence and trans identity, which is often suppressed in order to foreground healthy trans-subjectivity. Focusing on transmasculine literary and cultural accounts such as the Brandon Teena archive and Elliott DeLine's fiction, Awkward-Rich advocates for "the centrality of something like a dissociative poetics to transmasculine writing and thought" (28). For example, in DeLine's *Refuse*, the narrator does not attempt to join or heal an existing split in their character or personality but, instead, "DeLine uses the autofiction form to further multiply himself through splitting" (108). Further fracturing the narrative, DeLine's narrator Dean continuously refuses coherence, and the narrative ends up quite frustrating to read in its persistent failure to produce integration of disparate aspects of self. Awkward-Rich suggests that "Dean . . . occupies the theoretically overburdened territories of queer gender and much of the project of *Refuse* is charting how it feels—in DeLine's time and place—to do so" (110).

Chapter 4, "We's Company," turns to the potentially helpful aspects of "the trans recluse." Rather than the overdetermined "properly extroverted" model of publicly validated trans authority, this chapter moves toward other forms of sociality, exploring the life story of Michael Dillon as a mid-twentieth-century tale of trans

subjectivity grounded in reclusion and social anxiety more than the normative story of progressive emergence into (open and out) trans subjectivity.

An “Afterword/Elegy” juxtaposes the pop cultural promise of a “transgender tipping point” of visibility in 2014 or 2015 with the reemergence of transantagonistic legislation and challenges to trans lives around the time of publication in 2022. The book’s final pages speak to painful conflicts and juxtapositions of trans lives represented and self-represented, often through stories or notes of suicide or the narratives of victims of violence. Like the book in its entirety, Awkward-Rich remains unflinchingly committed to thinking through the conflicted perceptions about and amidst “sad and ugly” feelings and complex forms of maladjustment.

Honest, patient, and calling the reader to critically revisit how the splitting of trans from madness and disability has robbed trans discourse of important history and also depth, *The Terrible We* is a challenging and very much necessary book relevant to several intersecting constituencies and academic disciplines.

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Review of *Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis & Cultural Strategy* by Ben Davis (Haymarket Books)

by Tennae Maki | Book Reviews, Issue 12.2 (Fall 2023)

ABSTRACT The eight essays in Ben Davis' *Art in the After-Culture* are centered on the interchanges between cultural production and economic development in contemporary society. Largely told through the lens of leftist aesthetic theory, the book pushes against exploitative notions of capitalist systems and ambitions towards decentralization. Davis likens art to a "survival kit" and advocates for creative practitioners to strategically influence the direction of society.

KEYWORDS activism, aesthetics, art, capitalism, cultural production, democracy

Art in the After-Culture: Capitalist Crisis & Cultural Strategy. By Ben Davis. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2022. pp 272 (paperback) ISBN 978-1-64259-462-1. US List $19.95.

Ben Davis' *Art in the After-Culture: Crisis & Cultural Strategy* is a collection of essays about existing demands placed on art production and the critical potential cultural practitioners, including Marina Abramović and Nike Inc., have in determining society's direction. The book is weighted with political nuance and institutional critique ranging from general Marxism to questions of exclusivity and accessibility. While marketed towards general art audiences, the book definitely seems to hang closer to conventions instigated by the New York art world. Nevertheless, issuances of visual art are used as a mould to shape contemporary

debates surrounding social discourse and modes of restructuring in the wake of recent cataclysmic events, or in the “after culture” (1).

Critical engagements with patterns of legislative and economic power are seamlessly woven into the book. These are used as entry points into cultural analysis and are proven to be all the more appropriate when considering the hallmarks of visual art’s current orientation towards politics, technology, and exclusivity. Davis situates these topics of interest as being contributing factors in the democratization of culture. This point is carried throughout the book, demonstrating that the line between mass accessibility and exceptionalism is in a fragile state. Access has dismantled hierarchies and jostled gatekeepers.

Davis doesn’t necessarily position democratization as a good thing for culture. Throughout the book’s eight chapters, he is at odds with both the implications of capitalism and technology’s stronghold on global north societies. He does not seem optimistic about the trajectory of art and culture, either. Rather, Davis muses over whether or not art has become more or less visible and important to the many social factions amid globalization.

He opens this discussion in the first essay, “Connoisseurship and Critique.” For those engaged with the art world, it is probably the most accessible essay; a way to ease the reader into familiar yet discursive territory. Davis ties historicizations over the virtues of viewing a work of art outside of decorative and patronised contexts to the near aesthetic function served by romanticizing the modern artist. These ideations are rooted in capitalism, relegated to quandaries over authorship, and are used to contextualise today’s class stratification.

Class and mass cultural nuances are explored further in the second essay, “Elite Capture and Radical Chic,” particularly as they relate to the proclivity of art institutions. Davis maintains that these spaces are limited by the hands that feed them, the economic elite, which is antithetical to the common ethos of circulating art to communities.. Supported by several case studies and initiatives instigated

by the political left in the last century, such as Hans Haacke's actions against the Guggenheim and the ACT UP campaign, he argues that museums have an eccentric social placement that needs to be incubated to better serve emergent cultural movements.

Davis breaks open the "smartphone society" seal in the third essay, "The Art World and the Culture Network." Stopping short of the digressive rhetoric of decentralization adopted by those engaged in blockchain, he presents views on democratization via technology on and off the Internet. He laments the "artertainment" that has been normalised across museums and Instagram profiles, worrying that art is competing against culture rather than alongside it. Davis recalls that over the last decade art spaces shifted from attempts to curb smartphone usage to encouraging the implementation of hashtags and the like. The notion that technology has disrupted the plausibility of a sanctioned visual art colloquy is examined further in the fourth essay, "AI Aesthetics and Capitalism," which converges on how capitalism will inform art's displacement with the impending aesthetic contributions of Artificial Intelligence. He writes, "it is urgent that the conversation move from whether it (AI) will create "art" to what kind of art it will create and how it does or does not fit with what we want art to be" (92).

Generative art is characterized as rudimentary art, something that is substantive of Silicon Valley. Davis compares this impediment to the historical conventions defined by critics in the last century, which affirmed the need for successful art to be attached to both context and narrative. This lapse in meaning is said to be reflective of perceptions of novelty and convenience, from which the fundamental understanding of art is threatened. The fifth essay "The Anarchist in the Network," examines these perceptions of technology further with a discussion on modes of disintermediation and digital activism. Davis deflates glorifications of gatekeeper elimination with the same manner of proof that he used in the previous chapter; cultural standards would flounder without intermediaries.

Themes related to these principles are carried through to the sixth essay, “Cultural Appropriation and Cultural Materialism.” Davis starts by tackling one of the most controversial issues presently among culturists: standards and practices of appropriation and materialism. He compares the relations of cultural personhood to ones of power and capitalist hegemony. Surging demands to collect profits from cultural products are placed within the yields of exploited identities, might these be motivated by minority groups, class systems, or otherwise. The crisis of cultural identity is cross examined against conspiracy theories in the book’s seventh essay, “The Mirror of Conspiracy.” Davis uses aesthetic theory to investigate the political and knowledge seeking dimensions of the public. He suggests that the need for moral purpose has propelled levels of rightward extremism to the forefront, of which it might not be retractable.

The final essay, “Art and Ecotopia,” of *Art in the After-Culture* addresses contemporary environmentalism. Davis focuses on how art has been used as a utility of climate activation, from warning guides to presenting ideal planetary utopias. He casts doubt that artists might emerge as real changemakers. However, he cites that it is the very promise of change that could be interpreted as a survival skill, a much-needed contribution towards collective thought.

The author makes that contribution himself with this book. *Art in the After-Culture* could be interpreted as a manual, one that presents a complex narrative, demonstrating how art is found between the crevasses of cultural and economic life. His choice in bridging aesthetic thought with political skepticism reaffirms the significant potential availed through the ways of seeing. Careful symmetries drawn between noted art writers, from John Berger to Lawrence Alloway, rightly affirms Davis’ place within the canon of cultural criticism.

Davis doesn’t deviate from his agenda. Nor does he stray from his intended audience, those who are “located somewhere between creaking cultural institutions and volatile leftist cultural debates” (7). This is helpful in the matter of

maintaining a clear point of view through the mosaic of case studies and theories found in the book, although it might also be perceived as a disservice to the reader. It would have been compelling if he had optioned to complicate the arguments, as opposed to promoting the same progressive script most in the cultural industries have become familiar with. Arguments for a new socio-economic agenda need not be so well rehearsed.

With that being said, this book would be well suited for industry professionals, policymakers, and academics with a vested interest in how visual culture has and will impact economic discourse in the United States and beyond. Economists and creative practitioners alike would benefit from the ways in which Davis endorses art as a vessel to transpose meaning in material ways. As is reaffirmed throughout the book, society is at a pressure point, in the *after-culture*, almost definitely. Radical change is placed on a pedestal, as is the suggestion that meaning in art works better when there is diversity of thought looking for it.

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Tennae Maki is a PhD candidate with the School of Performance and Cultural Industries at the University of Leeds. Her research centers on art production through the lens of value creation and generative capital within the public domain. It builds upon her interest in establishing a new frameworks for artistic autonomy and ownership through perspectives of a global economy. She is also a contributor to the Brooklyn Rail.

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